
RESTLESS A NOVEL AND HAUNTOGEOGRAPHY: WALKING THE NARRATIVE

By Matt Mellor

Registration Number: 100358616/1

THIS COPY OF THE THESIS HAS BEEN SUPPLIED ON CONDITION
THAT ANYONE WHO CONSULTS IT IS UNDERSTOOD TO RECOGNISE
THAT ITS COPYRIGHT RESTS WITH THE AUTHOR AND THAT USE OF
ANY INFORMATION DERIVED THEREFROM MUST BE IN
ACCORDANCE WITH CURRENT UK COPYRIGHT LAW. IN ADDITION,
ANY QUOTATION OR EXTRACT MUST INCLUDE FULL ATTRIBUTION

UNIVERSITY OF EAST ANGLIA

Glossary

Arlunio – Art

Bendegedig – Wonderful

Bore da – Good morning

Ble wyt ti? – Where are you?

Capel – Chapel

Cariad – Love

Da iawn – Very good

Diolch/Diolch yn fawr – Thank you/Thank you very much

Duw – God

Gyda – With

Hisht – Shh/be quiet

Nos da – Good night

Sut wyt ti? – How are you?

Tad Carreg – Stone Father

Twll – Hole or pit

Access Condition and Agreement

Each deposit in UEA Digital Repository is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all or part of any of the Data Collections is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or for educational purposes in electronic or print form. You must obtain permission from the copyright holder, usually the author, for any other use. Exceptions only apply where a deposit may be explicitly provided under a stated licence, such as a Creative Commons licence or Open Government licence.

Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone, unless explicitly stated under a Creative Commons or Open Government license. Unauthorised reproduction, editing or reformatting for resale purposes is explicitly prohibited (except where approved by the copyright holder themselves) and UEA reserves the right to take immediate 'take down' action on behalf of the copyright and/or rights holder if this Access condition of the UEA Digital Repository is breached. Any material in this database has been supplied on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the material may be published without proper acknowledgement.

STAC

LLYR 1

Llyr rolled out from his twll and shuffled towards the ultraviolet light. He rubbed his bruised ribs. Dozens of lights stuttered to a functional glow. Distant coughing, from corners still hidden in the dark, bounced between the stone walls. It was permeated by closer yawns and sighs that slid out from nearby recesses and crevices. Bathed in the purple glow, the living woke as though from the dead. The UV highlighted every imperfection, spot and cut as families huddled around their designated lamp. Some, mostly children, dared to touch their bulbs before the heat got too intense. Anything to relieve the cold and damp. More coughing followed. As contagious as a yawn, Llyr joined in. Though he wondered if there was a genuine need to clear your lungs of the night or whether this was everyone's way of saying, *'I'm here, I made it.'*

Smooth cobblestones sweated out a morning dew and faint drips echoed throughout this dank twisting level of Stac. Each drip suggested the halls ran on forever, but they curled and twisted in a macabre parody of order with odd recesses where exhausted bodies found rest. The ones who hadn't risen turned over in a futile attempt at recapturing sleep. Two children started playing a game with some pebbles. Distant murmurs regarding rules sang through the patter. Some laughed, others bickered, one female voice sang in soprano with the notes occasionally dancing above other speech. Llyr thought he recognised the tune but the words were different week to week. Something about *'stones reaching for the sky'* and how each one, *'pebble or boulder, counted in the climb.'* Children joined in with the chorus and Stac echoed with song.

Llyr picked at a hefty chunk of moss. He'd noticed it the night before but opted to leave it for the morning. He savoured every pinch chewing and grinding it in his teeth until it slipped down his throat as easily as saliva. Apart from the final nugget, which he twisted out

of place and stuck behind his ear. He knelt down next to his ragged pillow and lifted two rocks which were placed against each other. Underneath was a narrow strip of sackcloth. He carefully raised it up to his bulb and unfolded it revealing the contents – a reddish-brown feather with a distinctive white marking starting at its base, then curling to rise around the edge. Faint brown stripes were still visible along its length. He picked it up by the quill and inched it close to his face. He just wanted the slightest touch, the gentle acknowledgment by his skin that the feather had graced its surface. It tickled. He scratched his forehead as he put the feather back in the sackcloth, taking a moment to appreciate its form before folding the cloth over and placing it under the twin guardian stones.

He pressed his back against a tiny waterfall, more of a thick consistent dripping, and shuddered at the cool moisture wending its way down his spine. He sighed as he waited for his back to become appropriately wet. It was never over quickly but he soon got used to the temperature. When he rolled around in an effort to cover the rest of his body, the stone was not as welcoming. He cupped his hands and gathered what little water he could and rubbed his face. It was in total opposition to the pleasant tickle of the feather so when he was finished, he tried to tickle his forehead with a damp finger. It wasn't the same. He turned and pressed his lips to the fattest part of the slick line of moisture and sucked.

Llyr's bulb flickered and there was a quiet pop as it went out. He tapped it. He unscrewed it from its socket and screwed it back in, but nothing changed. The newly darkened corner seemed to grow in size, the misshapen rocks forming the walls swelled and reached out for him. He emerged from the dark, bulb in hand, and into the light of his nearest neighbour. He nearly tripped over a young boy who ran out in front of him, chasing an unseen target. The child was closely followed by a smaller girl, who clutched a black stone in her fist. Laughter, permeated by the clattering of thrown stones, faded further down the corridor.

A soft wheeze approached through the darkness.

‘Bore da, Llyr,’ Mererid’s pockmarked skin in the purple light made her look older than her sixty-five years. ‘Need a new bulb again, is it?’ Every wrinkle in her face joined in with her smile.

‘Aye, bastard thing died again,’ Llyr sighed.

‘I’ll see if Taidy can’t have another go with it.’

Llyr placed the bulb in Mererid’s outstretched hand. Mererid shook the bulb next to her ear and listened intently for the tell-tale rattle of a broken filament. She tilted her head, as though tuning into the sound, and chuckled.

‘Ah yes, we’ll see what Taidy can do.’

She walked away but stopped after a few paces and stood completely still.

A tentacled mist, seeped through the cobbled floor and rose upward. The separate wisps banded together and formed a dense cloud. It screamed. The sound was hollow and distant at first, as though it began, not in a different room, but in an entirely different reality. It gained strength in sudden bursts. Half formed words boomed from the centre of the mass. The noise looped around itself and formed a circular echo which thundered in and around the cloud. ‘OONOONOONOO.’ Both Mererid and Llyr were filled with an overwhelming sense of loss. Llyr had to reach out to steady himself on the wall. He felt completely heartbroken and as though his legs would give out. Mererid reached for the wall but not quickly enough and she fell to the floor in tears. She took Llyr’s arm and he slid down and wrapped his arms around her and they shuddered together with bowed heads. The howling mist thickened and rose upward, hit the ceiling and met with resistance. It shone in response to the obstruction and bellowed louder around the two, completely engulfing them. Llyr gritted his teeth, gripped the wall tighter and pulled Mererid toward him. She buried her head into his bony ribcage. The mass faded back and away further down the corridor leaving a stench of

sadness. Families and other huddled groups shuddered as it passed. Llyr waved a warning to anyone who might see him and a frightened family took refuge in their twll by huddling tightly together. It quietened adults but children screamed and cried. Parents covered their children's ears and whispered constant reassurance through their fingers, though this was for themselves as much as it was for their infants.

‘Oh Duw, that poor, poor man,’ Mererid said as she steadied herself and let go of Llyr.

‘Yeah, just bloody awful. You knew him didn’t you?’ Llyr asked rubbing his head and wiping away a tear. He took several deep breaths and brought his shaking body back under control. The grief was leaving him, but not without the usual emotional hangover. He stood up, offering his hand to Mererid.

‘I did,’ she said and she took his hand. ‘He taught when I was in the Capel,’ she grunted through her laboured journey back onto two feet. ‘Taidy,’ she called, wiping away a tear, ‘Llyr’s bulb again.’ She smiled. Llyr could tell it was forced, but everyone has their way of getting back to normality. She pointed with the bulb towards a curtain a little way behind her and shuffled towards it. ‘Oh, and Llyr,’ she turned back to face him. ‘It’ll pass love, always does, doesn’t it?’

‘Yeah, always does.’ He managed a smile too.

‘Da iawn.’

Llyr shook off the remnants of sorrow and fumbled in the darkness for his top. He spent a few minutes trying to find insects but his fingers couldn’t follow their movements. The harder he tried the more elusive they became. Stac was now fully awake and the corridor was filled with the usual natter, snippets of sound within each was some semblance of humanity. One came from a mouth which must have been close to him as he jumped when he heard, ‘Cariad? Cariad?’ It felt even closer given the absence of light. The voice grew louder,

‘Cariad? Cariad? Ble, ble wyt ti?’ Llyr was draped in a veil of frustration and longing, much stronger than his need for an insect. Hunger wanted him to cover his ears and throw himself into his task, but the next time the voice spoke it was further away. ‘Dod yma, dod yma.’ It continued to call aloud as it faded out of existence. The intense need dragged across Llyr’s body and left him numb.

Aged feet ambled towards Llyr. He could hardly see Taidy in the darkness but he gradually came into view. His familiar method of navigating – feeling his way along the wall with a free hand – pleased Llyr. Taidy had once told Llyr that it gave him an entirely different perspective on Stac. ‘You’d be lost, me? I just have to stick out my hand.’ Llyr was secretly a little envious of the knowledge Taidy had at his fingertips. But, as soon as the thought popped up, he reminded himself that he wanted to see outside, and he thought of how his feather felt against his skin.

‘Here,’ he said, ‘it’s a spare. I’ll see to the one you gave me and well, that’ll be the new spare.’

Llyr had to guess as to where Taidy’s hand was but he found the bulb and turned back towards his twll. The bulb squeaked as he screwed it in, Llyr pictured Taidy’s smile at the sound of metal on metal. Indeed, that smile was the first thing he saw with his new light. Llyr never got used to Taidy’s milky white eyes. Just the sight of them was enough to make his own eyes water. Llyr often wondered whether Taidy actually knew this and whether that was why he always stared at him for so long. Just as Llyr wondered whether Taidy could see, his head would list to one side. Sometimes, he would turn around completely and apologise before continuing to talk or ambling off again, guided by his hand on the wall.

Llyr dragged his feet as he left his twll. He waited for a group of chattering children to pass, on their way to Capel, before he set off in the opposite direction. He made the same march every morning. Sometimes, he’d pass a pocket of people and one of them would join

him. Llyr followed another small group, most of whom adopted the same hunched posture as him as they plodded onward. A handful of slate-grey shadow figures permeated the living. They swayed like smoke from an unseen fire. They hadn't yet decayed into a roaming fog of intense feeling, though much of their personhood was long gone. The living ploughed on through twisting corridors and ducked under low ceilings. The grey figures drifted in and out of recognisable shapes, at once forming a human shadow before spreading outward into individual clouds. They moved as shapeless masses and only when slowing or stopping completely did they regain a human figure. They had no discernible features besides being different sizes. One of them, child-sized, stayed close to one of the taller shapes, which weaved in and out of the lower half of its taller companion. Llyr playfully waved his hand through it and it darted ahead before taking a tentative waft back towards him, then shooting ahead again. The living continued their uniform trudge. Their ragged clothing could have easily come from the same giant white cloth. Years of use and wear had turned white into various shades of a sickly yellow-brown. Together they climbed the gradual upward gradient until they arrived at the Rune Door.

The huge stone door was covered in hundreds of carved shapes that Llyr and his company didn't understand. Some shapes interlocked with one another and others were grouped together to create one collective carving made up of three or four individual markings. All around the perimeter of the Rune Door was an interlaced pattern that had no beginning or end. Llyr had often traced this pattern in his youth and some mornings, while waiting, he again found himself in that childlike quest for meaning. As a child he sought a beginning but as an adult he wanted an end. Either way he approached it the answer was the same.

Barely audible words muffled through the ancient rock.

'Every sodding day. We can't hear you,' Llyr shouted.

‘Just open the door, will you?’ Someone behind Llyr called.

‘One of these days, I swear, we’ll take that thing right out,’ another said.

They all felt that at one time and some more regularly than others: a strong desire to roll away the stone. None dared try. It required a coordinated feeling, heartbeats thumping in time to the same revolutionary rhythm. Instead, individual beats thudded against the stone in a pathetic and mute protest which seldom made it as far as empty words. Their will shrivelled in the face of action. Llyr couldn’t help but imagine what it would be like to gain the strength of many, tear down the Rune Door and take the supporting stone too. This thought crept into his head most mornings. He’d smash clean through the rock, then turn and destroy the wall of Stac itself. But what came after that? That always stumped him. Outside of course, but still, what then? Llyr thought of his feather against his skin. He found himself tickling the back of his left hand with his right index finger.

The Rune Door swung open, just a crack but that was enough. Before Llyr or anyone behind him could enter, half a dozen foggy impressions, like dull slate shadows, wafted through the group, causing them to shudder, and slipped through the opening. Some of the shadows whistled faintly and others produced sounds close to laughter. The child-sized one sailed right through Llyr’s legs and through the gap.

‘Every time,’ the voice on the other side grunted.

The corridor filled with laughter as everyone behind Llyr erupted.

‘It’s not funny,’ the voice declared, though that did little to quell the happiness, ‘I’m closing it until they’ve all backed off, make them back off.’

‘We can’t do that.’

‘Yeah, we can’t do that.’ The voice came from right next to Llyr.

Blodwyn stood with her arms folded. Her youthful face was in stark contrast to the pock-marked imperfections of the living, illuminated by the UV lamps. Blotches of

unblemished, seemingly living flesh appeared and disappeared in turn over the surface of her face. Wait long enough and squint to fill in the gaps and she *might* appear alive. Her bright smile revealed brilliant white teeth. She was younger than Llyr in appearance, but had been dead for over fifty years. She floated to a corner next to the Rune Door and sank down, fading into the wall as much as she could. She pushed until she met resistance and contorted her faint frame into place, meaning that just her face and part of her torso poked out.

The Rune Door opened wide and an offensively bright UV light flooded out. The crew braced for the impact and they all held their forearms over their eyes until they acclimatised to the light. They never quite got used to it. The sensation of their skin drinking in the colour had every man and woman rolling up sleeves, trouser legs and skirts to expose as much of themselves to the light as possible. It felt treacle-thick and heavy.

‘You guys stink today. I mean, you stink every day but today it’s bloody awful.’ Ioan, the Doorkeeper said. His face was screwed up at the sight of the work crew before him. ‘Also,’ he pretended to choke from the smell, ‘you’ve got some new folk following you back down there at the end of the day. Duw duw. You haven’t got soap down there have you?’ He braced himself on the door to support his exaggerated laughter.

‘And you haven’t got manners up here.’ One of the crew replied though Ioan frowned into the group as he tried to identify who spoke. Llyr shrugged at him.

The crew trudged through the opening, rubbing their eyes in an attempt to adjust to the brighter room. Blodwyn managed to slip underneath the Ioan’s arm and was immediately lost in the stream. It was much cleaner here. No dripping walls or visible moss. There was still a dank smell and closeness to the air. The Rune Door opened out into a wide room, in which the external walls had narrow slits which let in slivers of natural light. Several numbered ropes hung from the ceiling and coiled neatly on the floor in large piles. They were attached to pulleys which led through the ceiling to somewhere unseen by the crew. Each

crew member grabbed hold of a rope. Those with more energy and whose will hadn't been crushed by repetition attempted to secure a spot near some natural light. The cynics shook their heads at the elbowing and shoving struggle towards the tiny puddles of light.

'It don't make a blind bit of difference,' someone said.

'Ok, easy now, easy does it.' A disembodied voice, which seemed to come from a central point in the ceiling, commanded. 'Same as yesterday now,' it finished.

They took up slack in the rope and began to pay out arm lengths which ran up the pulley and onwards to its unseen destination. Maintaining tension required a lot of effort and it took two or more people to tackle a single rope. Llyr was paired with Ivor, a young and sinewy man. He was quiet and kept his head down, though this posture wasn't his choice. He lived in a twll with a low ceiling and had spent much of his life in a stoop. As a result, he'd developed a pronounced hump. Together, he and Llyr released several feet of rope and the disembodied voice boomed, 'oh you wish you could see it out here today gang. It's beautiful. Sunshine as far as the eye can see and even further than that. In fact, it's so bright I might have to look away for a while.'

Llyr didn't allow the taunts to affect him the way they used to, he'd long given up believing the voice and had decided that the person was merely in another tunnel of their own. More walls and doors which had to be opened for you and only when it suited the people on the other side. There was always another side.

Sweat poured from the rope crew adding to the clamminess in the chamber. Most of the other teams were producing similar levels of effort, either hauling or controlling the release of rope at the behest of unseen voices.

'Come on guys, don't leave me hanging in this heat. It's so sunny out here I can hardly bear it.'

Llyr couldn't detect the sarcasm in the voice.

‘If it is so nice out there, you won’t mind staying there for a minute, would you?’ Llyr said and adjusted his grip on the rope.

‘You,’ the indignant voice managed before Llyr interrupted.

‘And maybe you shouldn’t be so bastard heavy.’

The maintenance worker’s speech devolved into several foul-mouthed grunts.

‘You shouldn’t do that Llyr, you know you shouldn’t do that,’ Ivor whispered.

Llyr and Ivor hauled on the rope. It took every ounce of strength that their bony bodies could summon. They hauled or held in an irregular rhythm, called out by the unseen master, for hour after tedious hour. A pair close to Llyr and Ivor lost coordination and the rope ripped right through their hands lacerating their palms and threatened to disappear through the ceiling. It lifted one of them clean off the ground and together they fought to get it under control, with others abandoning their charge to help. When Llyr first started, accidents were rare, but they had developed into an almost daily occurrence. He remembered a time when twice as many hands worked half the ropes, a thought which vanished when he noticed Blodwyn trying to put her arm through one of the holes in the wall.

Blodwyn desperately tried to distort herself to fit through the tiny holes in the ceiling or walls but she kept meeting with the same resistance. She did her best to grit her teeth to stifle the sound but sometimes the pain was too much and she had to scream.

The sudden light and Blodwyn’s cries terrified one pair of workers into letting go of their rope. They managed to recover just in time with only minor damage to their hands, only to be scolded by the voice for nearly causing an accident. Llyr watched as Blodwyn lingered by the other Rune Door. The brickwork around the door was noticeably cleaner and more uniform in appearance. She placed her hand on one and it glowed. Clearly, the pain was tolerable for a few seconds and was easily contained in a grimace.

‘Alright that’ll do, lock it off,’ the voice commanded.

Llyr and Ivor tied the rope taut around a cleat bolted to the floor. Llyr took the mossy nugget out from behind his ear and found it was sodden. He tried to shake it off, but instead opted to rinse it in a communal pool of water. He lingered over the task and fully immersed his hand in the cooling liquid. A heavy bear paw of a hand gripped his bony shoulder.

‘That’s enough lad,’ Ioan said.

Llyr removed his hand and put the moss into his mouth. Ioan recoiled at the sight of this and Llyr smiled as he chewed.

BLODWYN 1

Blodwyn held out her palm and willed tears to drop onto it. None came. She rose through the ceiling and flitted between the living. One man threw himself right up against the stone wall to give her as much room as possible. His expression moved from fear to anger as she drew alongside him.

‘Why me, why not literally anyone else?’ Blodwyn muttered.

‘Don’t talk to me, just be on your way and I’ll be on mine,’ the man replied.

Mostly though, people scarcely recognised her. Some might do a double take as she passed and occasionally, she would stop and wave when they did. On the whole, people were content with her just walking along. It would be some time yet before she faded away into a cloud of feeling. Walking was familiar somehow – even though her feet didn’t touch the floor – and she held onto any bond which connected her to the living. She found herself smiling at two children who ran around a corner ahead of her, closely followed by the words, ‘come on, you’ll be late for Capel.’

Blodwyn tailed them as they ran in a zigzag pattern, seemingly incapable of going in straight line for more than a few seconds. Blodwyn remembered the excitement of being allowed to head off on your own for the first time. Of course, there was no way of knowing if that’s what these children experienced but she thought that must be the reason for their chatter and pace. She wondered if she was too far removed from that experience herself. Was it their first time or are they just genuinely happy? Children seemed to be, for the most part, happy.

They rounded another corner and came to an abrupt stop. There before them stood Taidy, his pale clay eyes drifting up towards the ceiling and he held the wall.

‘You nearly knocked me over then,’ he chuckled.

‘Sorry Taidy,’ they said in unison.

‘Not to worry,’ he smiled. ‘And who have we got here anyway, Selwyn and Angharad?’

‘Yes.’

Blodwyn wondered if they could speak as individuals.

‘But that’s not all,’ he said. ‘Come on, get going now, I’ll know if you’re not there because I’m going there now in a minute.’

‘Ok,’ they said with their chins on their chests and they hurried off.

‘I need a word with this lady here,’ Taidy smiled.

‘How did you know? Don’t answer that,’ Blodwyn laughed.

Taidy laughed. ‘I could do with your help, Blodwyn.’

Blodwyn was taken back by this. She thought that the days of providing help to anyone were long gone. She was thankful for being made welcome amongst the living whenever an opportunity came. She wasn’t always unwelcomed, but often enough and with a few stand out examples, which made her apprehensive. Loitering around and trying to get higher was always better than the alternative. Taidy’s kind voice shattered her apprehension. It struck her as odd that even though he was physically frail and blind, she felt safe talking to him.

‘Sure, what would you like from me? I’m not sure I can do anything really.’

The wrinkles around Taidy’s eyes tightened as he smiled and let out a quiet hoarse laugh.

‘You always had such a low opinion of yourself Blodwyn. I only wish that had changed during your lifetime.’

Blodwyn didn’t know what to say. She thought about blurting out all of the evidence she had to the contrary. Then she realised that her evidence would be shot down and exposed for being based on opinion. She wasn’t ready for that kind of conversation so she silently accepted Taidy’s words and offered a monosyllabic response.

‘Ok.’

‘Actually, it’s something that only *you* can do for me. For all of us really. If things are that bad.’

‘Sure, lead the way,’ Blodwyn replied.

Mostly, Taidy slid his palm along the wall as he felt his way along and led Blodwyn. But occasionally he walked his hand along on his fingers in a spider-like fashion. Blodwyn was thankful to have a guide but the speed at which they moved made her nervous. She knew only too well that anything could rip up through the floor at any moment. Only the threats didn’t just come from below. She hated and feared the screams, the horror with which some viewed her. It got worse the higher she went. The stone thinned as Stac climbed but so too did tolerance. So, she bore her vision into Taidy’s narrow, sloped back.

The sound of chattering children echoed louder with each turn they made. Phantom butterflies with tiny, smoky wings fluttered inside Blodwyn’s stomach. She closed her eyes and followed.

‘Are you sure about this?’ she asked.

‘Yes, quite sure,’ he replied and he paused a moment before adding, ‘don’t worry.’

The chatter stopped with one or two barely audible small gasps. Blodwyn opened her eyes. Capel, for the most part, hadn't changed since she last set foot in there all those years ago. Rows of children gazed up at her. Some were open mouthed and clearly fearful. The only adult in the Capel, a middle-aged woman, held her hand up to her mouth and nose, covering them both. Blodwyn watched as she observed the silence in the children, then she regained her composure and she opened her mouth to speak. But Taidy beat her to it.

'Bore da, my, my, aren't we quiet today?'

'Bore da,' the woman answered, 'what brings you *two* in here, Taidy?'

'You know my concerns and I've brought someone who can help.'

Blodwyn remembered the room well. She could easily see herself as one of the bemused or even inquisitive children. Not one of the frightened ones. Never one of the frightened ones. The large hall hadn't changed all that much at first glance. The ceiling, higher than anywhere else she'd been in Stac, was not quite as high as her childhood memory. She remembered the symbols all over the walls: runes – just like those on the Rune Doors. Only these runes were much larger. She always thought she would understand them when she was older, but she never learned the meaning of those large shapes. The minder when she was here, Mrs Williams, told her that they meant peace. That, 'once upon a time,' she began, 'they could put the restless to rest here.' The last time she saw her, Mrs Williams was a slow-moving fog which coughed as it passed.

'Right,' Taidy said to the room, 'who remembers why I, sorry, we, are here?'

Some of the faces searched each other for one brave enough to answer. A few still stared at Blodwyn and eventually one brave little hand rose up. Blodwyn smiled at the owner of the hand and the little girl smiled back.

‘To look at the wall, at Tad Carreg,’ she said.

‘Is that Eleri? Da Iawn. So, don’t mind us. Mrs Roberts, can we proceed?’

‘Of course,’ Mrs Roberts replied and she leant down to speak to some of the younger children, although her eyes kept darting back to Blodwyn. Blodwyn waved at her and smiled. Mrs Roberts forced a barely perceptible smile in reply.

The crude stone face loomed out from the wall. It was expressionless, therefore people found it easy to attribute any emotion to it that they saw fit. Blodwyn had never met anyone who truly believed in this *God*, Tad Carreg. Rather it just always seemed to her like somewhere to send their children, try to get them to behave and instil some kind of basic value system. Also, he served as a crude explanation for their circumstances and a way of ensuring there wouldn’t be any change. Things were divinely designed. Of course, this didn’t always work. In fact, given the number of genuine believers she’d met, she had to assume that it never worked. As for the fact that he, supposedly, provided the stone from his own body for Stac? Blodwyn thought there was no way that anyone could know that and still like him. She had come to hate that face.

She hated that he was male, that he somehow provided for them by giving them his body for them to live in, when all she could remember was wanting to leave his cold embrace. She hated the prayers and the thanks they had to give him at the start and end of each day. Most of all, she hated his angular and unchanging face throughout all of this. Most children forgot about him soon after they left Capel. But generation after generation he stared out from his wall. The same wall which Taidy now felt his way along.

‘Now Blodwyn,’ he started, ‘I fear, well I have a theory that this wall isn’t what it was or even what it should be.’

His hand stroked along the wall to the nose of the stone God. He knocked and tapped around the giant nose and eyes, all the while with a furrowed brow. Blodwyn wanted the wall blink or show some sign of discomfort at being prodded this way. She wanted it to hurt.

‘Here,’ he said, ‘I want you to try and pass through the wall.’

‘I can’t, you know I can’t.’

She looked up at the large runes above the face. She knew only too well what happened when they were crossed or disobeyed. The agony came first, then the runes glowed. Sometimes it was the only thing that made her feel real. She despised the tiny part of her that sought out pain for a chance to feel alive.

‘I know, you can go a little way in before you’re stopped, correct?’

‘Yes,’ Blodwyn said flatly.

‘Then please, try,’ Taidy’s voice lowered to a whisper. ‘If I’m right, it won’t hurt you.’

‘And if you’re wrong.’

‘Then yes, it’ll hurt.’ He paused. ‘But things will be so much worse if I’m right. Be careful, just go in a straight line, about here.’

He patted the bridge of the nose then put his ear against the wall.

As instructed, Blodwyn placed her hand on the stone nose. She slowly pushed through the wall, expecting the familiar shocking sting. Instead, her hand passed right through the wall and she could feel a cold breeze in her fingertips. It was like she’d thrust her hand into a river or a stream, but this was air. Air running through her hand. Taidy broke the silence.

‘No pain?’

‘No,’ Blodwyn said in quiet disbelief. ‘Why?’

‘Don’t move your hand around though, draw it back in carefully.’

‘This is where they’ve been working for some time. It *was* one of the thicker walls. They couldn’t be bothered to take anything from further down. So, they’ve been taking it from here, but they’ve taken too much. Now this wall is too thin. There’s a crack right down the middle of it, I can hear it. I can *hear* it.’

Blodwyn drew her hand back through the wall and turned to see the children playing. Most were playing games with round pebbles. Mrs Roberts smiled as she played with two of the younger children. Their laughter bounced back off the stone face and echoed through the room. Blodwyn put her hand on the nose again.

‘Can’t I?’

‘No,’ Taidy interrupted, ‘I don’t think you’d fit.’

LLYR 2

Ivor knelt and washed his face in the pool of water. Most of the work crew lingered by their anchored ropes. They mopped their faces, wrung out their shirts and stretched their backs and arms. Some helped their partners stretch, widening their arms or holding them in stress positions. Groans and wheezes echoed around the chamber as though the room itself required rest.

Llyr twisted left and right before reaching up and straining overhead. He inhaled deeply and tasted the days' effort in the air. It was bitter and salty and lodged itself in the back of his nose. When he dropped his arms back down to his sides, he felt as though they'd grown another inch. They soon settled back into their familiar knots and cramps.

Ivor was rubbing his face in preparation for another dip when Ioan's meaty grasp thudded onto the back of his head and pushed. Ivor thrashed with one hand, whilst the other seized Ioan's wrist as his head plunged under the surface. Ivor sunk his nails into flesh, drawing blood. Ioan chuckled and pushed further until most of Ivor's crooked torso was underwater. Ivor dug his nails in deeper as his face was pressed against the bottom of the pool, his head flailed from side to side as he tried to slip out. The crew watched. Ioan released his grip and slid his hand down to the back of Ivor's neck. Out of the water, Ivor rose, fighting for breath. He was seized once again and slammed into the pool. Ivor's screams drowned then rose in a torrent of bubbles.

'You wanted it,' Ioan spoke through gritted teeth. 'Have your fill.'

The rope crew shuffled closer together and closer to the pool to watch. Llyr reached the back of the group and raised himself up on his toes to try and see over the gathering crowd. He managed to see part of Ioan's hulking torso hunched over the pool.

Ivor tried to find something to grip in the bottom of the pool, but the rocks were too slippery. He fought with Ioan's wrist again, digging his fingernails in wherever he could. More blood was drawn. But, using his free hand, Ioan grasped both of Ivor's skinny wrists together and squeezed. The work crew shuddered as Blodwyn moved through them. She screamed. Everyone but Ioan covered their ears. The sound rattled the entire rope chamber. Blodwyn placed her mouth inside Ioan's ear and bellowed again. He gritted his teeth and pushed harder.

Llyr rushed forward through the rope crew and threw his fist as hard as he could at the back of Ioan's head. Using his free arm, the blow was blindly returned. Llyr saw it coming and dodged. 'Right,' he muttered and backed away.

'Filthy, absolutely disgusting,' Ioan said.

'Somebody do something,' Blodwyn shouted.

The crew remained motionless. Some watched open mouthed, others couldn't face staring at their own cowardice and chose to focus on their feet. A few splintered off and huddled by the Rune Door. Llyr took one of the ropes, unhooked it from the floor and stalked Ioan. Keeping the rope taut under his arm, Llyr tied a simple noose.

'Help him, help him,' Blodwyn shouted.

Llyr glared at Ioan's right foot. Blodwyn continued to scream but the muted sounds came from within Ioan's skull, mixing in with grunts and groans of discomfort. He staggered, releasing Ivor's wrists and clutched at his chest. Blodwyn hated being inside Ioan, but she enjoyed whispering to him about his organs eventually failing. He gave a violent shudder every time she entered his body. She rushed in and out taking care to ensure that her fingers

lingered over his heart and lungs. He tried wafting her away, so she opted to stay inside the body for longer and she heard the muted thuds of his heartbeat when she surrounded it. She willed it to stop, cupped it in both hands and squeezed but her hands just passed through it. Ioan's heart fluttered and faltered in an irregular rhythm. Blodwyn blew between his lungs like an arctic wind. Ioan growled.

‘Get. Out,’ he managed between laboured breaths.

Llyr seized Ioan's foot and pulled. The noose was two inches away when the exit stone opened. Ioan wrenched Ivor out of the pool and he landed in a heap.

In the doorway stood two women. They carried an enormous wicker basket between them on a thick hazel pole, which bent under the weight of the load. Blodwyn emerged from Ioan and glared at him, threatening to push her head through his.

Llyr released the rope and rushed to Ivor. The rope sailed through the ceiling and disappeared.

‘Come on now, again?’ One of the women said with an upturned nose.

‘Ah, don't you mind him, he's alright.’ Ioan patted Ivor heavily on his hump and he coughed up a small ocean of water. Llyr sat Ivor up and pounded his back with his fist and implored Ivor to breathe. The two women didn't acknowledge the crew. They strode the whole way through the rope chamber and left the basket at the opposing Rune Door, taking care to remove their pole. One adjusted the thick belt she wore while the other threw the pole over her shoulder. Llyr marvelled with envy at their clean faces and hair, their unblemished skin and clothes without holes. He also noted that they were somehow displeased with Ioan. His attempts at seeking approval, clearing his throat and following just a few steps behind

them, were met with silence. One flicked her ponytail over her shoulder just as the exit door closed while the other shook her head. Blodwyn watched the stone close neatly behind them. Ioan lost an inch in height as he sighed heavily before taking a sharp breath in and marching over to the entrance.

Llyr helped Ivor to his feet and supported him as they made their way back through the Rune Door. Ivor's confused steps came with a thunderous cough which shook his whole ribcage. Llyr wasn't sure if Ivor was crying, his face was still wet and he sniffed a lot between coughs and heavy breaths. All the signs were there, though Llyr thought Ivor was trying to hide them. Llyr imagined how Ioan's screams might sound if he pushed him down through several floors of stone to the horrors below. Enormous shadowy hands, belonging to long-dead savage beings, tore Ioan apart. He could almost hear it.

Three other crew members dragged the basket through. Ordinarily Ioan scolded whoever had been charged with this task. Something along the lines of, 'stop marking my floor,' even though the basket never left a trace, but today he remained silent. He wasn't even looking at the various crew members making their way out. Instead, he was preoccupied only with his exit, rubbing his injured wrist.

'Wait,' a crew member dragging the basket said, 'what about the ones coming down?'

Ioan looked indignant. He poked his head into the tunnel and looked around. Llyr wondered what it was he was looking for; it was difficult to make anything out in the gloom. He turned with Ivor and tried to make eye contact. Ioan would only look at Ivor with the left corner of his mouth pulling upward into the smallest possible smile. Blodwyn floated in front of Llyr and approached the open Rune Door.

'Yfory,' he said, 'I guess it'll be yfory.'

‘You’ve got no idea, have you?’ Blodwyn smirked.

She glared at Ioan and her eyes turned almost completely black. He frowned as he searched for a retort. Blodwyn reached forward and screamed. The guttural howl sounded as though it had come barrelling all the way along the corridor from the other end of Stac. Ioan slammed the door. The scream shot into the rope chamber and thundered around inside. The slam was so violent that Llyr allowed himself to hope, even just for a split second, that the Rune Door shattered into a thousand pebbles. But instead, the runes glowed for a moment in their usual luminescent green. Blodwyn lowered her arms and turned away from the runes and sank through the floor. Llyr watched her body drift through the stone until, the last misty wisps of hair faded from view.

Various family members crawled out of the darkness. They hugged fathers and mothers in the work crew. Children asked about what it was like behind the Rune Door that day. One or two asked about Blodwyn as they were still recovering from the scream. These questions were more difficult to answer and words had to squeeze around a lump in the throat of the speaker. Llyr stared at a man who was trying to explain the situation to his son.

‘You see, there was, an incident. Something happened and it wasn’t nice,’ his voice trembled as he kept stealing glances at Ivor. Llyr enjoyed the father’s squirming.

A little girl watched Llyr support Ivor. Llyr wondered whether there might be some sense in the ant-like thoughts which scurried about behind her eyes. One of the work crew dragging the huge wicker basket opened it. It was nearly full with various fruits and vegetables: potatoes, carrots, tomatoes, apples, broccoli, cauliflower, broad beans, onions, leeks, pears and parsnips. They were spongy and past their best but still people formed an orderly queue to receive them. The task of handing out the offering usually fell to Rhodri. He

had never asked for it and it was the fact that he was one of the few who didn't lobby for the job that landed him the responsibility. He usually did it without looking in the basket. He'd reach in with his large, calloused hands and give two handfuls to a waiting crew member. People dutifully took their handfuls of food, carrying them in their clothing and hurrying off back to their twll.

Llyr tried to explain to Rhodri that he collected for Mererid and Taidy as usual and that he would likely have to carry Ivor's for him. Rhodri, still avoiding to look, scooped out the contents, scraping the bottom of the basket and dropped them into a waiting stretched section of sack cloth. Much of the older fruits and vegetables had been squashed. Even with his large hands, Rhodri found it difficult to negotiate the slop that remained in the bottom of the basket. As ever, there were a few useable chunks and an unscathed vegetable or two in the corners to which Rhodri, as he was always last, helped himself.

He apologised and offered an extra parsnip from his own share as compensation. Llyr took what looked like a couple of large potatoes and an apple and he followed the conversation peppered with laughter as the living navigated the gradual descent to their homes. The laughter was necessary he thought. Something to put the events at the end of the shift firmly behind them and to place as much distance as possible between themselves and tomorrow. Dwelling meant no escape.

'You alright, Ivor?' Llyr asked knowing what the answer truly was.

'I was just washing my face and having a little drink. I wasn't taking that long, was I?' his voice was small and shrank further with every word.

'No,' Llyr added sternly, 'you bloody well weren't.'

Llyr dropped Ivor off in his twll and he thought he could hear sobbing between the coughs as Ivor crawled up tight to the wall and closed his eyes. Llyr wiped the apple on his

shirt and left it at Ivor's feet. Someone cleared their throat behind him and Llyr turned to see a small woman clutching some vegetables.

'Diolch yn fawr,' she said, 'You were the only person to do anything in there. I saw what you were going for, I wish you'd had the chance,' Llyr was taken aback by the speed at which she spoke.

'Me too,' Llyr replied.

'Well you and that, erm, Blodwyn,' The woman said.

'Yep. You could have helped too you know. If someone without a body is willing to step in-'

'Sorry,' she interrupted, 'I know I should have. I wanted to, like I said to the others, I wanted to. I think a fair few of us did. We really wanted to.'

'Well tell that to him,' Llyr said and pointed down at Ivor.

The woman looked down at Ivor and opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. She bent down and reached out with a trembling hand and came within inches of Ivor's leg before she withdrew.

Llyr left the woman with her hand still trembling over Ivor's leg.

BLODWYN 2

She drifted through the hallway. The comprehensive darkness was only broken by a few silvery apparitions. They, unlike Blodwyn, lit up a small area around them like a tiny candle. Some circled the same spot, perpetually pacing. Another followed her for a short way before descending through the floor with a guttural howl. None of the occupants could smell the rot or pick at the crumbling cement. She passed a few brackets which at one time housed UV bulbs. Occasionally, a faint but echoic greeting hovered out of a corner or from behind her and in one case from below. At one time the hall would have mirrored the chatter in the level above but many of those voices had descended into a howling wind, had dwindled to silence or feared speaking altogether. Some of the occupants were more whole and clearly defined, but most were already in advanced stages of decay. Blodwyn waved or smiled on her directionless way. Others did this too opting for their own routes, quietly greeting each other as they passed. Most reasoned that less motion would delay their second death and some heard this and were frantic in their movements. They decayed and dissipated into little wisps, like a spiky orb, which sped through Stac. No one paid them any notice besides a momentary pang of hopeless sadness. A whisp shot between Blodwyn and a fellow traveller. Blodwyn didn't feel upset or pity for the trapped lightning ball. Rather, she held a degree of empathy for their desperation and anxiety. At least, in their own way, the whisps were trying to take control. She always smiled at anyone she met and the greeting was usually reciprocated. The smile left as soon as socially acceptable, replaced with a blankness akin to the black hallway. Empty. Bereft of life, yet still somehow living.

‘Blodwyn, sut wyt ti?’

The voice came from an older woman. A head, her right shoulder and most of the corresponding arm and part of the torso floated, closing in on Blodwyn. She remembered when more of the body was filled in. Not so long ago, as recently as a fortnight, there was

another arm, the stomach and the top of a pelvis. Blodwyn had to mentally sketch in the rest. She was too used to doing that. There used to be something genuine behind the eyes and not the glazed stare and empty voice which remained. For the briefest moment, Blodwyn thought she could see her as she recently was, but the realisation shattered the illusion. It was fully buried under the question being repeated.

‘Blodwyn, sut wyt ti?’

‘I’m fine Anwen,’ Blodwyn said and winced at what she knew would follow. She drifted to Anwen’s right in an attempt to pass but Anwen moved with her.

‘Blodwyn, sut wyt ti?’ Anwen said.

She smiled with her eyes, though they still had a glazed look about them. They might as well have looked right through Blodwyn at the wall behind her. She looked up as though Blodwyn was above her and bobbed left at the mercy of the slightest change in the air. Blodwyn felt that she should just leave, move away. Part of her wanted to move on with greater force but another, more powerful, impulse compelled her to continue.

‘I’m fine.’ Blodwyn waved and feigned a smile.

‘Blodwyn, sut wyt ti?’ Anwen’s expression remained the same, but the words faded into a croak.

Blodwyn opted to move around her, taking care not to disturb or go through her. The part that wanted to ignore Anwen won though it was a pyrrhic victory. Anwen repeated the question into an empty hallway. She paused and nodded in the empty space where there should have been a response. Then, following a beat of silence, she repeated the question again.

A wave of fog rolled through the passage. Its deep growl thundered between the walls. It roiled in on itself as it barrelled through Anwen. For a moment the two entities were lost in one bloated cloud. The fog shook off the confusion and meandered as it advanced.

Blodwyn gave it the widest berth possible as it grumbled past muttering several distant and echoic half words. ‘Uck. Ach. Ach. Y fi. Y fi. Na. Uck.’

Anwen snapped out of her stasis and looked down at where her legs should have been. Her missing arm sputtered into existence before fading out again. She examined the nubs which used to be her shoulders and watched her arms flicker out like a dying candle. Her eyes lost their glaze, like shattering a thin layer of ice. ‘No,’ she whispered. Blodwyn looked on as her head rose and another chunk of her torso dwindled out of existence. She screamed and sunk downwards as though she had fallen onto her no longer visible knees. The scream gradually subsided and her eyes froze over. She turned to a blank section of wall with her hollow gaze. Blodwyn hurried away and could just about make out the echoed question, ‘sut wyt ti?’

LLYR 3

Llyr handed the vegetables to Mererid.

‘Back of the queue?’ She smiled. ‘Never mind, we’ll still get a good soup on. But first, I’ve got to show you this, follow me.’

Llyr nodded and followed the hobbling Mererid. She had more of a spring in her step than usual. She welcomed Llyr into her twll. A few rotten sheets lay neatly together on the floor under a main lamp. Another ragged sheet had been fastened into the ceiling and lay like a curtain, obscuring a deep corner. She held her finger to her lips then cupped her ear with her hand and winked at Llyr. Her eye was swallowed up by a series of happy wrinkles.

It was just a trickle but it was constant. It sounded different to any of the other tiny leaks found in Stac. More robust and the stream wasn’t hitting stone, it was water on water. Taidy clumsily emerged from behind the curtain. He felt his way along the wall to safety.

‘Do you like it?’ he asked.

‘I can’t see it the curtain-’

Mererid shushed Llyr again as she pulled back the curtain to reveal a tiny circular pipe. A leak in the wall had been worked and opened and a crude pipe, fashioned out of rock, had been shoved into its place. A steady dribble of water flowed out of the pipe and into a waiting bucket. Mererid washed the potatoes in the tiny flow. Llyr could tell she was absolutely beaming, despite having her back to him.

‘I reckon one of their water traps,’ Taidy pointed upwards, ‘is leaking and I’ve tapped into the overspill. Still, it’ll probably be a while before they notice and we could use something fresh. Ever since that useless tap packed up.’

‘That’s grand Taidy,’ Llyr said.

He thought about how decadent it would be to pick up a bucket and drink straight from it, trying to empty the vessel in one go and having it pour down his front. Or even to submerge his entire head and then sink his hands into the bucket and feel the water going up his arm. He wanted to find an enormous vessel to store water in or even build a pool.

‘Well now we can hand these out and around. We’ll have more water than we know what to do with,’ Taidy laughed.

He fumbled around for an empty bucket and dragged the full one out of the way. At the rate it was filling it would take at least an hour before the next bucket was full. He felt his way along the wall with one hand and held the full bucket in the other. His unstable gait led to some water splashing out. He slipped a few times but always regained his footing.

‘Here, you take that one lad. Wash. Drink. Be merry,’ Taidy gently placed the bucket in front of his feet and Llyr picked it up. The bucket had a small leak, a ponderous drip which Llyr only noticed when he inspected the underside. Llyr raised the bucket to his lips and drank deeply, quickly gulping down more than a pint. It was difficult to maintain a decent angle with the heavy bucket and inevitably some water ran down Llyr’s chin and onto his chest. He put his hand under his top and rubbed this excess water around. It was cold but intensely refreshing.

‘Diolch yn fawr,’ Llyr said as he inspected the bucket and fought with conflicting thoughts of washing his clothes or himself or just drinking the rest of the bucket right down. ‘Really Taidy, bendedig.’

Llyr lay in his bed on his side staring at the bucket. Over the sound of his breathing, he could just about make out the quiet trickle of the next bucket being filled. Llyr’s bucket still had plenty of water but he’d decided against drinking it down as a small chilly ball formed in the centre of his stomach. He soothed his hardened stomach with small circles of

the palm of his hand. The little wooden bucket seemed to smile up at him. He wriggled closer to the edge of the rim, peered over and was greeted by his smiling reflection.

BLODWYN 3

Blodwyn passed by her mother's twll. Every time she saw the bumpy threshold, a part of her wanted to turn around and run away. This part, like the rest of her, knew that there was nothing there for her but memories. Comforting though they may be, there was always the inevitable thud back to the present. She knew that remembering might provide her with a smile, a happy moment dredged up from her childhood, or young adulthood, so many decades ago. However, it always ended with a sudden separation and a lasting sadness at how far removed she was from that time and even that person.

A curtain separated the twll from the rest of hallway. It always pleased her that this simple streak of cloth was surviving the worst of the decay on this level. It was raw, functional and simple and somehow that was the best approach to survival in Stac. Just behind the curtain, at the back of the twll was a crude outline of a woman on the wall. She drew it when she was just eight years old.

She'd found the charcoal lying in the hallway. It struck her as odd, crumbly and entirely black, nothing like the other stones she'd held. She crushed it between her fingers and noticed that it left a black dust behind. She rubbed it on the floor and to her surprise it made marks. Excited, she ran to her twll and drew the first love that came to her still beating infant heart – her mother.

In her head the picture came on incredibly well. The level of detail, including pleats of her mother's skirt and the way she wore her hair in a braid, transferred with perfect accuracy to the stone. But when she took a step back to examine her work in progress, she was disappointed. It wasn't that life like after all. Yes, it was the outline of a woman, but the legs and feet weren't right, neither were the arms or hands and the face was just a blank oval.

She was about ready to give up and angrily rub at the picture with anything that came to hand.

‘Da iawn, quite flattering.’

Her mother approached, sat down and encouraged Blodwyn to continue. She asked her for help and her mother gave her a rag to rub away the limbs until she got them just right. The whole time her mother sat behind her on the floor, occasionally stroking Blodwyn’s hair and encouraging each individual mark. Her mother’s hands reached around and patted her on the thighs when Blodwyn said she was finished. She liked to do that, she said Blodwyn had, ‘lucky legs’ because she was lucky to be standing on legs so thin. Of course, it was only a harmless tease.

Blodwyn never did fill in the face. As she loomed over the drawing, she couldn’t even fill in the blank oval from memory. Despite its lack of eyes, the drawing stared out from the wall. The same blank face was there whenever she closed her eyes. And upon opening them, she honed in on the exact spot once again. In the opposite corner of the twll lay some torn rags, waiting to be made into clothing. Blodwyn carefully thought through the process of picking up a specific piece of cloth and rubbing it back and forth on the wall until the figure had disappeared. Changing her mind, the blank oval face watched as Blodwyn rose upward through the ceiling and into a silent corridor.

Stac slept.

She drifted past dozens of sleeping bodies. She couldn’t see them, but just hearing muttered sleep talk and the occasional snore made her smile. The next set of voices she heard came from above. Depending on the thickness of the stone, they quietened and grew in volume as she traced them along the hallway.

Blodwyn faded into the ceiling. Her body met with the usual resistance at this level. She glowed and the pain shot through her from head to toe and back again. She managed to

keep from screaming. Determined to listen to the voices, she took herself to the limit the runes allowed and swam through the ceiling, directly underneath them.

‘Thanks for coming with me. I’ve always been interested in the lower levels. But Duw, I will need a shower when I get back upstairs,’ the voice belonged to a young woman.

‘I don’t mind. And yeah, I’m feeling a bit of that myself. It’s like there’s filth in the air,’ the voice was a young man. Blodwyn smiled. His attempts to please her with everything he said shone through the stone.

‘Well, Daddy wants to build a new turret. Itchy fingers mam calls it. I say he’s just trying to keep up with Aneurin.’

‘Of course he is. Does he know you’re doing this?’

‘No, obviously. If he did, do you think I’d wait until he was asleep?’

Blodwyn turned sideways to keep her ear close. Every inch travelled was another risk of being shocked. When she got too close, she felt a buzz as the runes began to work but she pulled away before it hurt. Testing with every step, she picked out their words as she floated through the burning tightrope.

‘Daddy needs the stone. It’s not like there isn’t plenty to go around.’

‘Oh yeah, there’s loads. I mean, it’s everywhere down here and they’re not even making the most of it. Using it all properly like. Sad really.’

‘Yeah, pity, not blame.’

Blodwyn lost her sense of balance and slammed fully into the runic barrier, right beneath the couple’s feet. She screamed. It was only for a second but that was long enough to make the young man above scream too.

‘What was that?’ the woman said.

‘I don’t know,’ the man replied frantically, ‘we’d better get out of here.’

His footsteps tapped away and the woman followed.

Blodwyn sank back down into the other noises in the night.

LLYR 4

Llyr woke to the sound of arguing. The voices sounded closer in the darkness. They rumbled on the edge of his consciousness, and dipping and rising like the bulging misshapen walls in which they were contained. The argument came in hushed tones, every *s* laced with venom, every *mine*, *me*, and *I* sharp and clear. They kept their voices low, careful not to wake the sleeping residents. Llyr considered rolling over, pretending to sleep, and letting the conflict burn itself out. He was some way along this line of thought before he recognised that the calm and quiet voice belonged to Mererid. He thought he heard her say, ‘stop, stop, please.’ He sprang up and shot over toward the voices. Taidy and Mererid’s candle was lit.

Llyr ripped back Mererid’s curtain. Wyn held Taidy up against the wall. He didn’t appear to be using all that much force. It wouldn’t have required a lot of effort to hold Taidy back and Wyn was hardly a stout figure. He was sinewy, much like Llyr and the other residents at this level, but not as tall. Even so, with just his fingertips he pushed Taidy into the wall. In the flickering candle-light Llyr could make out the little impressions each fingertip made on Taidy’s chest.

Mererid pulled weakly at Wyn’s arms. Taidy threw slow slapping blows to the right of Wyn. He kept correcting his aim when each attack met nothing but thin air. Unfortunately, he was correcting in the wrong direction and kept swinging further and further to the right so Wyn shuffled his weight accordingly. Llyr had never seen Taidy look so desperate and frightened. His white eyes darted every which way and his lips trembled. He’d always imagined there was a hidden strength to Taidy. Even in his ancient limbs, despite the sagging skin, there was still some muscle tone and definition in the right light. However, that was an impression formed in childhood and it had never been challenged.

‘Why haven’t I had any yet?’ Wyn said through gritted teeth.

‘We told you,’ Mererid implored, ‘the bucket is filling, if you can just wait, it’ll fill up soon enough and you can take it away. We promise. You were next anyway. You were next.’ She leant into his ear, ‘please,’ then leaned back and pulled.

‘You can hear it filling, can’t you hear it filling up?’ Taidy begged as he turned his head from left to right, trying to wriggle out from Wyn’s hand.

‘Of course I can hear it, it’s all I can fucking hear,’ Wyn spat the words out through gritted teeth.

Llyr crept up behind Wyn and slid his arm around his neck and squeezed. He pulled Wyn off Taidy and Mererid let go in time before they thudded onto the floor. Llyr had tried his best to brace for impact, but the uneven cobbled floor clumsily worked its way between his ribs. He rolled out from under Wyn and fought to get on top of him. Wyn started kicking the wall as he aimed for Llyr’s legs. Llyr leant his weight onto Wyn’s chest and struck at his head.

‘Get off, get-’ Wyn managed.

Wyn tried to reach up and punch Llyr in the face. Llyr managed to twist and turn out of the way. After three or four missed punches, he wasn’t throwing them with the same intent and instead tried to pull Llyr’s arm off his chest.

‘Bastard,’ Llyr replied as he punched Wyn in the face.

Llyr slid his hand up to Wyn’s neck and squeezed. Wyn’s eyes bulged as though they were going to burst right out of his head. Veins flared up on his forehead and he clawed wildly at Llyr’s arms and face. Llyr punched him again and raised his fist ready for another blow. Wyn held his hands up in surrender.

‘Alright, ok,’ Wyn croaked.

‘Let him up Llyr, let him up,’ Mererid said. For once she wasn’t smiling.

Llyr squeezed as tightly as he could. He wanted to keep going. There was a sweaty smell filling his nostrils from Wyn's greasy head, which only urged Llyr to continue. He closed his eyes and imagined for a moment what it would be like for Wyn's body to disappear, to transition from his first life to the next. Despite the rising guilt, a huge part of him wanted to continue. Taidy placed a hand on Llyr's forehead. Llyr opened his eyes and never, he thought, had Taidy stared right through him like that before.

Llyr released him. He rolled Wyn over to one side and stood over him, rubbing his knee as he checked his arm for bite marks and scratches. Wyn coughed and kept feeling all around his neck and whispered to himself, 'oh duw, duw duw.'

'I just,' Wyn fought for each word, though Llyr felt he was making rather a big deal out of it. 'I just wanted the water. That's all. I got so thirsty when I heard about it.' He kept tapping his throat.

'Are you alright, Taidy?' Llyr asked.

'Aye, I'm alright lad. I'm fine. Tip top.' Llyr wondered if Taidy enjoyed hearing Wyn gasp for air.

Mererid guided Taidy to the bed where they sat down. She wiped away a tear and her familiar smile attempted to crawl back across her face. It faltered but eventually, with a deep breath, it was back. In the quiet between gasping and wheezing, water continued its steady drip into the bucket. Wyn coughed and with great effort he sat up and stared at the bucket.

'It'll be full soon. Come back in the morning. Please. The first one is yours,' Mererid quivered.

Llyr reluctantly offered a hand to help Wyn up and he took it. He strained to get up on to one knee, then the other. He held up his free hand to Llyr then held his throat again. Llyr was pulled harder at Wyn's arm. He fell face first onto the floor in a pathetic heap.

‘Come on, move.’ Llyr grunted and nudged Wyn in the side with his foot. The impact, though slight, rose up his leg and settled in his sore knee.

Wyn rose, straightened his tunic and shuffled away.

‘Patience lad, it was your turn anyway. Patience,’ Taidy called.

‘Shh. You’ll wake everyone up.’ Mererid whispered.

The rope crew trudged to the Rune Door with heavy heads. Llyr considered asking someone about Ivor but he already knew the response. Something along the lines of, ‘don’t know, don’t ask, don’t tell.’ There were too many ‘don’ts’ in Stac. Llyr thought about going back to check on Ivor and when he turned to look behind, he noticed the wide berth the rest of the crew had given him.

Smoke rose through the floor and filled the corridor. In the centre the shadows settled into something resembling a face. An expression formed. Sunken eyes and a lighter brow bent and shaped themselves into what Llyr thought was confusion. The face took up nearly the entire corridor, leaving only a narrow gap either side. The work crew froze. ‘Down, get down,’ someone whispered. As the face neared the group the expression twisted again into one of rage and the newly formed anger was accompanied by a throbbing heat.

The crew began to sweat as though they’d been roping for an hour or more. A potent mixture of anger and fear surged through every single one of them. They ricocheted between the feelings with each heartbeat: at once boiling with a homicidal rage and in the next instance terrified of the form approaching them. ‘Down, down, get down.’ A few people screamed. Llyr grew nauseous in the tempest of heat, anger and fear.

The face grew until it dominated the foggy form and completely filled the hallway. The mouth opened and a noise unlike any living sound emerged, echoing through the head of everyone in the area. It felt as though Stac shook so violently that it could collapse, yet the

stone stood fast. They all scrambled for the walls of the corridor, taking refuge in any crevice or nook they could find. Some could only manage to spread themselves out like a starfish on any available wall space. The voice had an anechoic quality, the listener's skull absorbed the sound. Words came like giant falling rocks and too slow to recognise at first. Some crew members ran back toward their twll. Those that remained closed their eyes, placed their palms over their ears and pushed.

Llyr ducked down and attempted to tuck himself into the wall. The face crept forwards and shouted its first discernible words. 'GehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhT.' Those that hadn't managed to squeeze themselves out of harm's way were passed over by the deafening form. The corridor was filled with screaming, from those passed over by the shape or those in fear of it. Llyr rolled himself into a ball and braced for impact. The shape passed over him like dragging sandpaper across an open wound. His heart slammed in his chest like a sledgehammer to a rhythm of rage and fear. He gritted his teeth and howled, although the sound was muted by his form of defence and wholly lost in the background din. The deafening shape paused momentarily and the crew realised and took a breath. It roared again and the crew joined in with their guttural calls. 'Owwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwt.'

The face faded into a hideous writhing shape and passed through the work crew and continued down the corridor. Most rose. A few, including Llyr, helped others to their feet. They helplessly watched as the face headed further down the corridor towards their families. The shape rose and lit up like a thunder storm when it touched the ceiling. It sunk slowly and passed through the floor to the level below, shrieking as it descended. Llyr threw a pebble down the corridor after it.

Blodwyn shot up through the floor and cautiously eyed the spot where she had entered.

'Did you see that?' she asked Llyr.

‘Yeah. Wow. It had been a while.’

Llyr rubbed his face and he shook off the residue of feeling. Others had their own techniques: face rubbing, hand shaking, stamping on the floor, scratching their torso or rubbing your back against a wall. The physical sensations acted as a placebo to give the mind a crampon with which to pull itself out of despair. One man stood with his hands on the wall as he head-butted it. His forehead was a bloodied red mess, but every five seconds he’d thud it again. Another crew member tried to pull him away, but the man tackled her to the ground. Only after the first blow did he come to his senses, rise up and run away.

Blodwyn joined some of the other grey shapes that tried to join the living in the Rope Chamber. She stood out as decidedly closer to life than any of the others, who were mostly just impressions, active silhouettes which wafted on their way. Some had spent their lives above but had found themselves banished to lower levels. With something close to their last rational synapse, they chose to go somewhere familiar, the place they had spent much of their first life. Above. Blodwyn stood like a lighthouse in the centre of their smoky mass. Only for a brief moment when passing between lights or directly under the full strength of a bulb, could you see right through her. Even then it was only in patches, before a brief hole in her cheek or forehead would take on a translucent quality.

The Rune Door opened. A woman, who Llyr thought looked remarkably clean, stood in place of Ioan. She smiled and gestured for the crew to enter.

‘Morning all,’ she said.

She either didn’t notice or didn’t care to mention the small group of foggy humanoids that joined the crew in the chamber. She couldn’t possibly have seen them slip through the still open exit door on the other side. The speed with which they darted across the floor was barely noticeable to Llyr and the few others that watched. Rhodri shared a smile and a

knowing look with Llyr as the woman noted her mistake and she slowly approached the exit with Blodwyn close behind.

BLODWYN 4

Blodwyn slipped through the door, closing her eyes and bracing herself. But the woman's footsteps faded away. When she opened her eyes there was no one there. A dim violet light high above her revealed a steep spiral staircase. Blodwyn inched upward. After just a few stairs there was another Rune Door. It was like any other Rune Door she'd seen but she hadn't imagined there would be any beyond the Rope Chamber. It lit up angrily as she passed by and she felt a pull towards it like a magnet drawing in metal. She managed to twist away from it and continued upward, navigating passed another two Rune Doors. Upon reaching the top she bathed in a strong violet glow. Blodwyn examined her palm – it was completely transparent, just a vague purple suggestion of a hand.

Another huge Rune Door stood before her. These runes were larger than any others she'd seen apart from the ones in Capel but they didn't glow when her hand neared the surface. The dull shapes remained as they were, sleeping letters in a language long forgotten. Her hand neared and she was about to try and push through when the door opened a crack.

It was a child, no older than ten. She wore a ruffled dress which looked irritating, Blodwyn thought of how that must feel against the child's skin and remembered her own handed down dress. The chafing, the redness where the hem met with her living flesh. She couldn't recall the feeling, it was lost along with her flesh, but the image of warm crimson blotches stayed with her. The child stared open-mouthed at Blodwyn.

'Bore da,' Blodwyn said.

'B, b, b,' the child stuttered.

'What are you doing down here?' Blodwyn smiled and raised a finger to her lips.

Blodwyn wasn't sure if the child was terrified or curious. Their open-mouthed frozen stare could have easily been fear or wonderment and she hoped it was the latter. In her

experience, it was rare for children to stand still when afraid. Ordinarily, they'd run away if they were frightened or cower behind a scowling adult.

'L, l, looking for the wall man.'

'The wall man? Do you mean the man who opens doors?'

'No,' the child said with a frown, 'I'm not allowed to talk to him. No one is at the moment.'

'Oh,' Blodwyn said and keen to keep the conversation going she quickly offered, 'oh do you mean Tad Carreg?'

'No,' the child laughed, 'just the wall man, he's, my friend.'

'Well, where is he?'

'He is usually around here somewhere,' she said, pointing to the walls about level with the floor. 'Mam told me he got stuck when they were building. Bound to the wall she says.'

Blodwyn couldn't make anything out in the walls. She suspected that she was taking part in a child's imagination, although Blodwyn had never thought of people in the stone besides Tad Carreg. She was usually more concerned with what lay on the other side of them. When she was a child, she would listen intently at the surface of the rock and imagine that the sound of blood pumping in her body was actually that of great roving storms of weather or huge insect-like creatures rubbing up against Stac.

'Last time I saw him he was out here but he can be just about anywhere. Sometimes even back here.'

Blodwyn followed the little girl back through the door. Here, the corridor was filled with daylight. She only briefly allowed herself to check on where the child was – she was crawling and inspecting the lower portion of the wall beneath a window. The stone looked neater here and the colours, every possible grey, shone. She fixed her gaze on the source of

the light, which was a small window close to the ceiling. Blodwyn realised she could hear something. A gentle trickling, pattering sort of noise like water tickling a large surface. She shot to the window.

The land before her rose steeply into two hills. A standing stone, stoic and solemn, on the tallest hill, loomed on the horizon. It looked like a giant tooth sticking out of the ground. The shadow of the stone reached down along the sloping land. The sun had barely risen, though it managed to penetrate the dawn mist. A small copse atop the next hill bristled with life. Broadleaf shrubs rustled, taller trees with bare limbs like gnarled hands swayed in a light breeze. Rain breathed across the hillside. Grass stretched between the hills and towards Stac. Blodwyn's eyes darted between the intense greens and browns. She didn't know where to look. She tried to force her head through the window but she met with a familiar and painful resistance. She grunted and was working up to a desperate scream.

'There,' the child called and pointed to a shadow in a small corner of the wall which, if Blodwyn squinted, resembled a mouth and eyes.

'You have to get close to hear him, he's quiet.' The child said and she lay down on the floor and pressed her head into the corner. Blodwyn put her head next to the little girl's and listened. It took her a moment to tune in to the muttering clumsy speech.

'Back to rock, go I. Warm. Bright. I has a face and skin and both are red. This wet. This wall. Above open and blue, or grey or wet. Always wind blows. Oh and white, white fall come from sky both full and empty. White and cold. Hard to dig in hard soil. Full stores and full bellies. Warm flesh shelf below chest. Soft and full. Go pat pat and tight up to hers back in sleep. Above. No rock. No stone. Wind. Go I to move like water gyda cariad. We moves and moves in night light by moon. You know moon. Sky come glow, come torch, come cold but glow. Glow gyda cariad. We moves by night light. Not day. No day. Days for dig, pick, move as told. Before rock overhead. Way before rock overhead. Just back-to-back rock.

Sleep and move. Many lights in sky. Not moon, many lights. But go. One by one. Overhead rock come as sky and gone. Gone. Overhead is all rock. Not sky now. All rock. Mouth hard like rock. Cut me out.'

Curiosity flickered across the child's small, uncertain face as she looked up at Blodwyn, eyes bright with wonder.

'Mummy says he's stuck. It'd be nice if he came out.'

LLYR 5

Llyr, armed with half a dozen potatoes and leeks, followed behind the bulk of the crew as they left the Rope Chamber. He cautiously tightened and released his grip around a medium-sized potato. It was solid. The rest of the vegetables were clutched in his arm and they started to form a wet patch on his torso. Each time he squeezed the single solid potato he dared to try a little harder and left indentations as his fingernails broke the surface. Llyr moved his hand around in disbelief as he was determined to find a soft spot.

Just before Taidy's twll, four children were busily scratching shapes into a long stretch of wall. It was covered in pictorial offerings. All sorts of imagined creatures blended into one another and towards the base there were several human feet and ankles. To try and trace the leg upward would only lead into a flurry of dream-like creatures. The images flickered in the faltering violet light. Llyr thought he could make out one of his own carvings – an imperfect circle with stick like protrusions that represented feathers. It was his first idea of a bird, an idea which hadn't developed much since its inception. However, it was highly unlikely that he'd identified his image, given the multitude of chaotic sketches. In fact, he found a couple of spots which could have been his bird at one time but have long since been absorbed into another picture or another scene. A small part of him wanted to join them and put up a bird. He could reach much higher now and maybe it wouldn't be a bird this time, just the feather.

However, the children weren't concerned with animals – they were busily replicating the runes. The children weren't chattering or laughing as they carved, as Llyr did in his memory. Their mouths were silent, besides the panting, whilst they maintained a furious pace. Their deep gouges brutally tore through older carvings and they would soon join up these lines to form perfect replicas of the runes. For a moment, Llyr wondered whether they

were trying to carve right through the wall to force an opening. But just as he had this thought, as he observed one child scraping a two and a half foot long vertical line, the little boy switched direction at the apex and began a new line at a 45-degree angle.

‘What are you lot up to?’ Llyr asked, knowing the answer.

‘Arlunio. We just like the shapes,’ one said while scraping a deeper line.

Another had filed down the sharpened point of the stone he was using and had to swap it for another pre-selected stone. He carefully placed the used one in a small pile of others at his feet and blew on the fresh one before starting again. Llyr thought he could make out some long lines at the base of the wall near the child’s feet. Three long lines with two shorter lines between them. Water? Wind? Either was better than replicating runes.

‘The way they light up is nice,’ another said.

‘I suppose, but don’t they keep us separate?’ Llyr countered.

‘Safe,’ the eldest boy said and stopped his carving and turned to face Llyr, ‘they keep us safe.’

Llyr imagined these new runes lighting up and the children clapping at the sight of them. What next? A new level or split this one into two? The process rolling over itself and beginning again as it had before him and will do long afterward. He frowned and whispered a furtive wish that they would remain dead shapes.

Mererid emerged from the darkened entrance to her and Taidy’s twll carrying a bucket of fresh water. She grinned when Llyr waved the leeks at her. They were as close to fresh as anyone could hope for on their level of Stac. A young woman approached from the other end of the corridor with a baby clinging to her breast. She shifted her arm under its

weight and held her finger up to her lips. Llyr nodded and Mererid held out the bucket of water for her. She took it by the handle with her free hand and mouthed, ‘diolch.’

She was only a few paces away when the whole level shook with a deafening roar. First came a dozen or so whisps. They whipped up through the floor, hit the ceiling above and yelped before they shot out past and through Llyr and Mererid. The carving children broke into pairs and ran. An enormous fist, easily twice the size of Llyr’s torso, rose up through the floor. After the wrist and elbow what followed was a ball, like ocean spray, filled with echoic voices. The baby started crying in the young woman’s arms. She dropped the bucket, emptying it of its contents, as she hurried away from the threatening presence. An occasional word or phrase broke above the confusion. They were accompanied with either a facial expression or a fist. ‘I told you,’ boomed all around. The fist reached out of the ball before taking aim and shooting back into itself. The ball dipped and rose in and out of the floor as it continued towards the Rune Door.

‘Ugh. Good riddance,’ Llyr said.

‘Never mind,’ Mererid soothed, ‘let’s get that veg on. I bet you’re starving.’

BLODWYN 5

Blodwyn stared at the small section of wall where the mouth and eyes had been. She didn't know if she wanted them to reappear or for the wall to remain silent as every other wall she'd known. Her gaze flitted up to the window and the freedom beyond. She knew she'd have to move soon and so she silently pleaded with the window. She'd even asked the little girl if she could open it before she left. She felt guilty for asking that of a child but if it was the only option she'd have taken it. Sadly, the young girl said that the window didn't open.

Daylight was fading outside, though the rain hadn't subsided. If anything, it had increased and was falling in ever-thickening drops. Blodwyn couldn't hear anything besides the rain. She longed to be out in it, even though she carried the bitter knowledge that she wouldn't be able to feel it. She reassured herself that it wouldn't matter. It would be enough to see the trees up close, maybe even passing through them. She imagined herself tucked inside the trunk of one of the larger trees with just an ear poking out, listening to the rain and whatever else there was outside.

The Rune Door flung open. The little girl, crying, was holding on to a woman's leg.

'Sorry,' she sobbed, 'I didn't mean to.'

The woman's face was screwed up in a mixture of revulsion and anger. But she wasn't looking at Blodwyn head on. Their bodies faced each other, but her head turned to almost 90 degrees. The woman glared at Blodwyn using only her peripheral vision. Blodwyn considered trying to slip into a wall but it was too late. She thought she might as well enjoy the woman's discomfort.

'You, how did you get up here?' the stranger asked.

'I didn't-' the little girl started.

‘Shh.’

The woman was holding a small stone tablet with tiny runes engraved on it. Neat and narrow, it fit smoothly in the palm of her hand. She held it up and pointed it towards Blodwyn. The runes glowed a soft pink. Blodwyn couldn’t tell if it was the tablet that was shaking or the woman’s hand.

‘Just let me out,’ Blodwyn sighed.

‘I shall do no such thing,’ the woman scolded.

‘Then I’ll have to stay right here,’ Blodwyn said, standing up off the floor. She glanced out of the window, sensing it might be her last opportunity. Trees. Green. The light was fading but the green wasn’t. It had just taken on a different mood as the shadows sauntered through bushes and around the trees. Something flew past the window quite close to Stac, but Blodwyn couldn’t identify it. The woman caught her in the act and smirked.

‘That? That little window?’ she laughed and allowed her head to twist slightly closer to Blodwyn. ‘My dear, don’t be so pathetic.’

Blodwyn took a single step forward. The stranger thrust the tablet forward and muttered something under her breath. The soft pink light shone in her hand and Blodwyn felt an almighty shove which pushed her down the stairs, sending her crashing into the Rune Door. The runes pushed her back out. She was like a piece of metal caught between rival magnetic fields. She screamed and as soon as she did so the child joined her, begging for the woman to stop. The woman smirked and turned to face Blodwyn head on. She pulled the tablet back a little and allowed Blodwyn to be thrust forward a little by the Rune Door. Then, she savagely thrust the tablet back out again throwing Blodwyn into the Runes. She descended the stairs grimacing at Blodwyn’s every movement. Blodwyn tried her best not to

scream. The best she could manage was a stifled grunt. She glared back out at the woman and willed all of the air to leave her lungs.

‘Child, get the door,’ the woman said, her voice dropping down a few octaves.

Dutifully, the little girl did as she was told. With great effort, she forced the Rune Door open. She sobbed and couldn’t bring herself to look at Blodwyn. Blodwyn wanted to tell her that it was alright and that it wasn’t her fault but she couldn’t speak.

‘Well for once you were telling the truth,’ the woman said to her as the child scurried back behind her.

‘As for you,’ she aimed the tablet at Blodwyn again, ‘get out.’

The next shove sent Blodwyn through the air at speed. She flew deep into the Rope Chamber and the Rune Door slammed behind her. She didn’t even have time to get up before the door burst open. An expectant looking Ioan sat in the gap.

‘I knew I’d be-’ he started before he saw Blodwyn. He glanced at the woman holding the child by the wrist. His face dropped, ‘bloody hell, how did you get out there?’

Blodwyn staggered through the empty chamber. The heavy door thudded closed behind her and she could almost feel the light from the window peel away from her back like dead skin. She’d never been in the rope chamber after hours before and the room seemed much larger without crew. Ioan had just one light on, leaving each rope dimly lit in a parody of a noose. She didn’t know why, but her first thought was of the face trapped in the wall. The voice which spoke from that little corner had been a person at one time, she pondered. His fate was worse than that of the countless others before her that wandered the halls until they expired. Some part of him had clung on but was it even aware? She thought of a little drawing Mrs Williams have given her in Capel, not long after her mother had passed. It was

of a man standing in a pool of water and the level was rising. He was holding onto a big rock and a speech bubble read, 'but it is the only thing I've got to hold on to.'

'Hey,' Ioan said, rising to his feet.

'Look, do you want to do this again,' she pointed at his heart, 'I'm happy to, but just let me out.' Despite knowing she could simply pass through him whenever she wanted, she needed this victory. 'Now,' she said.

Blodwyn felt dizzy, as though her entire being had been shaken to pieces and clumsily reassembled. Everything hurt but was simultaneously numb. She assumed that Ioan wouldn't want to be alone with her, so he'd have no choice but to comply. He walked – Blodwyn thought him to be quicker than usual – over to the Rune Door and swiftly opened it. He had his gaze firmly fixed on a specific corner of the room. Clearly, he'd set himself up there with a pile of rags serving as a bed. Blodwyn smiled and let out a small laugh, though she hoped it was just about loud enough for him to hear. Just as the Rune Door closed behind her, she noted that, one of the rags was green. Ioan blocked the view with his enormous frame but the green couldn't be forgotten.

LLYR 6

Llyr joined the crew on their way to the Rope Chamber, stumbling half-aware behind the plodding group. Some of the crew shared their observations as to why there were fewer figures that morning. Perhaps they were leaving earlier than usual? Or maybe most of the figures that wanted to head upwards had already done so or given up. ‘Happens every now and then,’ an older crew member offered, ‘comes and goes, peaks and troughs.’ Each offered their own clichéd opinion. Llyr was still being given some distance by many crew members. He wanted to question someone, force a bit of conversation and enjoy their visible discomfort, but he opted not to. Just like the figures, this happened every now and then – he acted out and paid a social price for his behaviour. Normalcy was usually resumed right at the start or during a shift. He wondered how long it would be this time.

‘Llyr,’ Ivor called.

Limping, Ivor made his way towards the pack. He kept looking over his shoulder as though he’d just had an unpleasant encounter. A few of the crew noted this too and picked up their pace. Llyr smiled, held out an arm for Ivor and patted him on the back.

‘Good to have you, how are you doing?’ Llyr asked.

‘All good ta, just need to get that first day back out of the way then all good.’

Ioan opened the door with an enormous yawn. He sighed and dropped back down on his pile of rags. He didn’t even notice Ivor. He simply rolled over to face the wall and lay still. When the crew entered, they were immediately struck by the sight of the ropes – each one had shifted, now hanging in a neat line along the outer wall. It wasn’t unheard of for them to move, but it hadn’t happened in some time, and the change unsettled them. No explanation was ever given; they were just the muscle. A mule doesn’t question the cart’s destination – it only pulls. The scramble for familiar positions had gone and was replaced

with a listless wandering. Llyr waited until all the ropes had been chosen and he and Ivor took the final space.

‘Ah, another wonderful day,’ the voice boomed.

Llyr shook his head at the sound of the voice. He never knew if the voice could see him. Sometimes, he got the impression that it could, due to the voice responding to things happening inside the chamber. But no mention of Llyr today, so he kept wondering and shaking his head in defiance.

‘Right, heavier stuff today guys,’ there was an audible groan from several members of the crew, but most took it in their familiar sense of browbeaten duty. Ivor tightened his grip on their chosen rope. Llyr smiled at him. The voice chimed in again. ‘We’ve got some serious work. No slacking. Maximum effort from every single one of you.’

Llyr wasn’t sure what maximum effort meant. He took in some of the faces around the chamber, all of whom showed signs of great effort every day. Sweating, muttering and swearing under their breath in between grunts and groans, complaining, when prompted, of joint pain in their knees, elbows and backs. Several had audible cracks and pops when they began work at the start of a shift. Once he’d noticed it, the wincing never quite went away. Instead, he noted the pattern, which started with wincing, soon joined by exaggerated facial expressions, any small exertion was performed through pain. Finally, some element of that expression – deep forehead lines, a heavy brow – lingered permanently on the face. Llyr wondered when the winces would come for him. Every day he wondered. Every day he was thankful they hadn’t arrived. It was only a matter of time.

‘Anyway, altogether everyone, take the strain,’ the voice demanded.

Each rope had at least two pairs of hands to them, but some had three. Countless palms and fingers seized their charges. Ivor had a steely face and an immense grip; he looked about ready to pull the rope right through the ceiling.

‘You alright, Ivor, mate? All good yeah?’ Llyr asked.

‘Definitely,’ he growled before looking up at Llyr out from underneath his hump, ‘definitely.’

‘HEAVE,’ the voice thundered.

The whole crew responded with vigour and hauled on their ropes with all their might. Faint rumbling and cracking sounds bubbled under their efforts. The ropes began, inch by inch, to show signs of progress. The collective might of the rope crew all pulling in unison, instead of their usual individual efforts, was surprising to all involved.

‘Steady guys, steady now.’

Some didn’t hear the voice over the grunts which echoed in the chamber. Others heard but didn’t care. Only a few pairs heard and eased off a little, but they soon saw the efforts of the fellow crew and responded to the moment. Something primal stirred in the group. Llyr felt it. His typical apathy was discarded in favour of this ultimate effort despite not knowing what they were pulling.

‘Easy now, ease off. Ease off I said.’

The voice bellowed but it washed over the crew like another bead of sweat. Crew members daredn’t take their hands away from their ropes, so they shook their heads dry. The act could easily have served as defiance in the face of the command. Llyr looked over his shoulder at each rope straining, almost to the point of snapping, but, hand over hand, incremental gains were made. Some were motivated by fear. If the owner of the voice ever

revealed themselves, they would surely collapse from the anxiety. Others wanted to finish as soon as they could, believing that if they got the day's workload done soon then they could leave. Most just did as commanded. Llyr boiled with anger and hatred. Hatred for the rope and anger at the voice ordering them to act. No matter the motivation, the action was performed in unison.

The floor of the chamber shook and groaned. The rumbling grew louder and along with it came scraping and more protestations from the voice. With a crack, each rope was torn out of the crew's hands. Callouses ripped right off the skin and they stood dumbfounded with bloody palms as they watched the ropes shoot through the ceiling.

‘She’s going. She’s going. What have you done?’

The moment passed. The crew members looked to each other for direction, comfort or acknowledgement. Llyr was the first to laugh. He stared at the small hole in the ceiling which had just eaten his rope and laughed again. Ivor joined him and Llyr's heart sang at the sound of Ivor's laughter.

‘Fuck. That’s done it. Keeper, let them out. No crate today. Fuuuuck,’ the voice descended into a distant foul-mouthed grumble.

Ioan shot up from his pile of rags and opened the Rune Door. He scuttled back to his corner as soon as it opened. He was careful not to make eye-contact with Ivor. Ivor kept his gaze firmly on Ioan, to the point of walking backwards through the Rune Door. The crew had never been sent out so early. Llyr knew the situation was serious, but he couldn't help but feel a sense of triumph.

The corridor ahead of them was filled with light.

Everyone shielded their eyes. Llyr passed cobbles and crannies but all looked different in this new, yellow light. Sunlight. The stone was less monochrome than Llyr realised. He ran his hand along the wall, fingertips dragging across the subtly different shades of grey; silver, slate, smoke and soot. Plenty of hard-won moss was visible in the ancient cement. Some of the stones looked black in colour and covered with slime. What had once been bumpy but uniform was now revealed to consist of a mosaic of stone in which no two were alike.

Crew members paused to enjoy the warmth on their skin. Llyr's arms and bare shins itched in the intense light. A persistent cool gust blew through the hallway. Llyr resisted the urge to remove his clothes altogether, but he shoved passed some of the slower and more cautious members of the crew and hurried to the front where he was hit by the full force of the breeze. The elation was shattered when one crew member, Llyr didn't know who, called, 'the kids.' The crew moved in one dull mass towards the source of the light and towards the screams.

BLODWYN 6

Blodwyn narrowly avoided another encounter with Anwen when she heard the screams, which started at the same time as the rumble. Whisps shot through her and slipped through the ceiling toward the disturbance. Despite lacking a physical body, she knew that this event was entirely material. Stac shuddered. She followed the whisps and rushed through the ceiling toward the source of the noise, Capel.

Most of the distressed voices belonged to children. Crying not for a parent nor calling any specific name, but bawling in pain. Blodwyn knew that sound, it was helpless. Each turn in the corridor revealed more light. The dust hadn't settled and the new dawn revealed great clouds of it. Whisps hurtled ahead of Blodwyn and became less visible, with most disappearing in the full force of the day. Taidy shuffled as fast as he could and Blodwyn raced around him. His grip on the wall was faltering and he had to steady himself before he continued.

‘Gwyn, Taidy, what’s going on?’ Blodwyn asked.

‘Blodwyn? There’s been a collapse,’ he panted. ‘Capel.’

‘Collapse,’ she repeated to herself unsure of how to feel about it. ‘Tad Carreg?’

Taidy nodded.

The screams seemed to be dying down just outside Capel. She longed to steady Taidy, offer him an arm to lean on and guide him. But as she thought this, she noticed her arm was much less visible in the daylight. It was still there, she knew that, but it was a mere outline. She desperately hoped this was just a feature of the light and not the inevitable decay. She couldn't help but think of Anwen and others, further along than her, and how they might

appear in the light. Together Taidy and Blodwyn paused to let a pair of the rope crew rush past, away from Capel, each one carrying a child over their shoulder.

She followed Taidy into Capel where the light was at full strength. Part of the ceiling had collapsed and rubble and heavy portions of stone lay everywhere. However, the hole above had already been covered so you couldn't see through it. This had, doubtlessly, been done from above. Broken children were being carefully lifted out of the room by members of the rope crew. Most carried out their task quietly, giving only whispering reassurance to the children. Taidy approached the final pair of rope crew, Llyr and Ivor, as they attempted to lever a particularly large lump of stone off a small boy. He lay under it with his eyes closed. The stone covered his lower body and much of his torso, up to his sternum. The boy rocked his head from side to side. Blood trickled down his cheeks and chin from his mouth, which occasionally opened and closed.

‘Come on,’ Llyr grunted.

Ivor and Llyr were nodding at each other before each new attempted lift. With great difficulty, Taidy lowered himself down to the level of the stone and counted to three aloud. The three of them managed to lever the stone a marginal distance off the boy. They repositioned and Taidy counted them down again. Blodwyn felt she knew what would happen next even as the event unfolded before her. She'd seen it too many times, although it had been a while since she'd seen it in anyone so young.

‘Fuuuuuck,’ Ivor shouted as he gave another great effort.

Although they'd managed to twist much of the surface of the stone off the boy, a hefty chunk remained on his chest. Taidy, scrambling around for a better grip, managed to give the boy a soothing touch before settling on his new contact point. They heaved again as if the whole weight of Stac lay in their hands.

A dishevelled Mrs Roberts approached and knelt down besides the boy's face. She whispered something into his ear and then felt his head with the palm of her hand. Then, she put her hand in front of his nose.

'I'm sorry,' she sniffed 'he's going.'

Llyr and Ivor wrenched at the stone with all their might, accidentally knocking Taidy back onto the floor. Blodwyn wanted to say something but she knew there were no words that would help. The huge section of ceiling sunk further into the boy as his body gave in with a loud crack. She couldn't look away. The section of ceiling, no matter how hard Llyr pulled, met with the floor. There was a slow crunch as stone met stone.

'No, fuck, fuck, fuck,' Llyr shouted.

The boy stood up inside the stone.

'What's the matter?' he asked Mrs Roberts.

'Never mind Owen,' she smiled. 'Run along, I'm sure your parents want to see you.'

All of them watched in silence as the little boy skipped out of Capel. He turned to wave just as he went out of view. Llyr sat on the floor and stared into the offending lump of ceiling. Ivor put his hand on Llyr's shoulder and sank down next to him.

'He'll figure it out soon enough,' Mrs Roberts said. 'That's most of them now.'

'Most of them?' Blodwyn asked.

'Yes,' Mrs Roberts stared blankly at the corridor, 'most of them.'

Taidy managed a defeated smile which he aimed at Mrs Roberts. Blodwyn carefully skirted around the group and sat at the edge of the hole in the wall. Tad Carreg's face had been ripped out of the side of Stac and lay in several pieces on the valley floor below.

Blodwyn couldn't help but smile as she surveyed the brilliant green landscape. Everything seemed so much more vibrant through the hole than it was through the window. It helped that she was lower down. The trees were clearer. Their limbs swayed in the wind and Blodwyn admired the shape of every branch and leaf.

Llyr sat next to her. They briefly made eye contact before their gaze returned to the rural expanse. Llyr was breathing in deeply through his nose and exhaling long and exaggerated breaths. Blodwyn only allowed herself to feel jealous of that for a second before focussing on what looked like a dense grouping of trees which started on the left side of the horizon. It couldn't have been more than two miles away. Between her and the trees was a luscious carpet of grass, with dense clumps which danced in the wind. A red kite dipped into view. It soared over the valley and the sun peaked through the clouds.

'Right,' Llyr said as he got up. 'We're going. All of us.'

DRIFT

DESCENT

Llyr and Blodwyn knew the stone beneath their feet. Blodwyn sat there as a child over seventy years prior. She'd attempted to scratch her name into a round mound of stone, a single cobble which stood proud from the rest. It was still there, decades after her crude efforts had failed. She couldn't feel around for any tell-tale markings that she'd made and she saw that no identifiable markings remained. They had either been covered by others or they'd been too small to begin with. Looking back, she thought that it might have been defiance that led her to undertake that small act of rebellion against Tad Carreg. Somehow, putting her name on that little stony protrusion gave her defiance in the face of its owner. Then the frayed edges of the memory faded away and she was an adult, long dead, inserting ideas and beliefs into a childhood already distorted by time and darkness.

Years previously, Llyr had aimlessly traced between the various misshapen rocks on the floor. He'd crawled along on his hands and knees, blowing bubbles, looking for tiny fissures of weakened cement. He'd carefully traced along its length until the fissure widened where it met with the wall. He scratched and dreamed of his finger breaking through the wall. He'd always thought that's where his interest in the outside came from. He wasn't trying to reveal more of the room, he told himself, instead each poke and scratch was another attempt at escape. However, now the stones were cast in an altogether different light. Black and charcoal gave way to lighter shades of grey and delicate patterns and detailing crawled across the surface of the stone. Llyr and Blodwyn's memories wilted in the sun and the Capel was muted against the vibrant view.

The wind tugged at Llyr's breath and with each pull it robbed his heart of one beat. Blodwyn examined her limbs, reassuring herself that she was seen in this light. Both felt that they were being pulled forward rather than being pushed out. It was over the hill and the

horizon and within the earth itself. They were being drawn by every blade of grass and tree, the many shades of green the light rain and the kite on the wing.

Their focus settled on the trees on the horizon. The cluster of bark and branches seemed so far away, yet staring at them for a few minutes made them feel they were in touching distance – the deceptive perspective meant that the valley between them disappeared. Blodwyn even held up her hand and that was enough to put the trees in their rightful place. Why this small copse was the source of their focus was unclear. Whether it was because they were the first trees either had ever seen or because it was the furthest point away, they didn't know. Something lurked in the shadows between branches and on the leaf strewn floor between the trunks. The longer they stared at it the denser the wooded coverage became. The trees gently swayed in the wind.

Llyr sighed and took a tentative step closer to the edge. The wind tugged at him, threatening to pull him down into the splash of colour below. A gust surged up his ragged tunic and he kept having to adjust it so he could see. Just beyond his toes, three storeys down, over the bulges and bumps of the exterior of Stac, was a grassy floor. He inched his right foot slightly further.

Blodwyn wanted to run towards the hole and throw herself out, but thoughts of what might happen to her if she did rooted her to the floor. Would she be blown away on a breath of wind? What if she jumped and was pulled right back into Stac? She thought of the fate of the Wall Man and this was almost enough to push her out of the hole. However, she couldn't follow through and she stood there making vague threats to herself about jumping.

'I bet you won't. Just like all the others,' Blodwyn teased and smiled. Through the smile she knew she said it for herself as much as Llyr.

'Hisht,' Llyr snapped.

He sat on the floor and dangled his feet over the edge. They met with a bumpy shelf-like stone. He kicked his heels into it until he was satisfied with its integrity. Blodwyn looked back into Stac behind them and saw two children watching from the doorway to Capel. Behind them, a small crowd of adults, each armed with crude tools and sacks of stone provided by the levels above. The collective effort would have to make do with resources which didn't look like they were up to the task. Most of the crowd frowned disapprovingly at Llyr and Blodwyn. An elderly man, unable to stomach what he was watching, spat on the floor. His saliva narrowly missed the children, falling between their feet. There were one or two faces that seemed somewhat saddened. Why, Blodwyn couldn't say. Llyr had tried to drum up support for leaving and he practically dragged Mererid to the hole but she recoiled in horror from the landscape below. The saddened expression shifted between a few different people, jumping and landing on a new individual. Llyr threatened to widen the hole if he could. Frustration caused Blodwyn to shout about bringing the whole structure tumbling to the ground but no one would listen and of course, they hadn't the power. But how could they not want to go outside? He'd expected that one or two would want to stay put but he'd assumed that as many of them as possible would want to leave. They could have taken bits from Stac to build something new if they so wished. But Llyr and Blodwyn gave them the option of roaming, rebuilding or staying and in their silence, they chose the latter.

That was what it was about really, at heart, choice. Blodwyn preached that for the first time, they could choose. Where they wanted to be, what they wanted to do every day and surely that had to be better than what came before. Llyr just nodded and thought of the sun hiding behind clouds on the horizon and how he wanted to walk towards it until his feet ached. The reply was a chorus of grumbling. Talk of loss after the accident, the wish for safety and through it all an unspoken fear of the unknown. Each complaint was punctuated by taps of a wall or the ceiling. Dull stone thuds which reinforced the idea of Stac, despite the

hole. Leaving didn't make sense to anyone but Llyr and Blodwyn. Llyr announced his departure to a hall of silence. Blodwyn thought that the community would only feel safe when they saw the hole closed with their own eyes. Her sadness was placated with the briefest glance outside.

Llyr fumbled with a small piece of folded cloth tucked into his waistband. It was still there, his feather. He tapped it a few more times before he rolled onto his front and, using his toes, he found the little shelf again. He looked up at the small crowd gathered at the entrance and his panicked expression settled into a frown. He imagined getting up and with a rope he'd magically seized from the Rope Chamber, he commanded everyone to abseil down the side of Stac. One by one with broad smiles they descended, whistling as they went. Outside they would be happy.

In reality, however, they groaned, recoiled from the light and shouted at him to hurry up. His eyes settled on Ivor, whose heavily furrowed brow and downturned mouth were aimed squarely at Llyr. Llyr wanted to say something, but nothing he thought of seemed right. He wished they'd change their minds and see that there had to be something better out there they just had to find it. Nothing he arrived at seemed to serve any purpose but continue the argument he'd already lost. He gripped the edge of the wall and lowered his torso down.

The wind constantly teased Llyr, threatening to sweep him right off the side of Stac. Fortunately, the cumbersome structure was covered in bumps, bulges and divots for a novice climber to place a hand or a foot. Every time he stretched for a new hold, he desperately hoped that his foot would touch the ground. He kept his gaze fixed on the wall and did his best to ignore the promise of a green floor. The light, though welcome, was a problem. Llyr's eyes watered in the glare and he wished that it would get darker or he would acclimatise, whichever came first. As long as the foot he moved met with something solid, a test he

answered by kicking the spot, he felt safe to proceed. Progress was slow. He gripped with his toes through his crude shoes onto any foothold he found and despite the cramp in his hands and feet and cuts to his fingers he continued.

‘I thought you wanted to go,’ Blodwyn called from above him.

Llyr didn’t respond. He wondered how much easier this would be without a physical body, although he didn’t want to find out. However, there was a brief lightning bolt of thought which shot through his head and told him to let go. He looked up, noticing his pale hands rapidly losing the little colour they had from their tight grip and he dismissed the idea.

Blodwyn eased herself out of the hole. She thought it best to stick to Llyr’s speed if possible. She braced herself by attempting to kick into the wall, but the stones repelled her as every rune did inside the walls. Though she couldn’t see the familiar fluorescent light, she knew it was the runes. Their resistance painfully pulsed through her. It was the only physical sensation she had left. She fought the pain, refusing to let Stac win, showing anyone who was watching that she and Llyr were happy to leave. At the same time, she wondered if this was how it felt to be outside of the horrid structure. Was it going to be constant? Was this what outside would be like? She thought of a life where all the pain forced her in on herself until she became a taut ball of panic, shrinking ever smaller from the pressure. Shaking her head, she refused this image and thought of herself gliding over the grass below. She accelerated down the wall. She sped past the crawling Llyr and thought of the faces of those inside, which was enough to make her smile. She jumped away from the wall and its magnetic influence. An enormous rock weighing several tons stuck out towards the bottom of Stac. Blodwyn was able to hover just above it.

The rock formed part of the foundation. It was just one in a sequence. In fact, Blodwyn thought, there were several much larger rocks, which formed a crude line. She

couldn't help but wonder how they were moved into place. The cowering, yet angry mass she had just left bore the necessary tools for plugging the hole. Despite this, she couldn't imagine them having anything to do with these enormous rocks. Memories of Tad Carreg came to her and how she had always been told a specific interpretation of him – crouching down, hugging the inhabitants. But no matter how hard she tried she couldn't mould these boulders into toes or feet or even legs. Even so, the lines, getting straighter as Stac rose, didn't seem to fit in alongside the trees, the grass, bushes and birds. She gazed upwards. The summit of Stac was obscured from view due to the angle of the wall. Llyr's limbs trembled as he worked his way down.

'Come on,' Blodwyn called up to him.

Her voice sounded uncomfortably distant to Llyr who froze in the grip of that realisation. He thought about putting his hand right back where it just was and going all the way back up. Escape required skills he had no way of practising and a climb of faith was much harder than a leap. After a brief glance between his feet and down to Blodwyn below, he reevaluated and reassured himself that it wasn't that far. Uselessly, he tried to wipe his still streaming eyes on his shoulders. Any drops that were mopped up by his coarse clothing were soon replaced, he couldn't stem the flow. Llyr craned his neck back and looked upwards for the source of the light but he couldn't see anything other than Stac's wall bending and warping above him. If he went back in, he would never leave again. With renewed vigour, he kicked his feet into some new holds and attacked the journey.

'Stay there, hold it right there,' Llyr called.

Above her boulder, Blodwyn stood tall as she watched Llyr descend. He held his head awkwardly as he stared right through her. Each clumsy scrambled movement of a limb brought him closer, and she could tell that he tried to make each movement faster than the

last. Blodwyn couldn't help but chuckle at Llyr's doubled efforts as he slithered down. There was an occasional slip or misstep, but Llyr always caught himself before he fell. He lowered his right foot onto what he thought was a new shelf and took his left hand off the wall to find a new hold when he slid downward. He sunk his hands and feet back onto the wall and even employed his chin in the effort. He growled as skin broke and he left narrow trails of blood against the rocky outcrop.

Roaring in pain, frustration and triumph, Llyr came to a sudden stop on a chunky ledge. He wanted those in the hole to hear him and he almost followed it up with 'cowards.' In his anger he didn't think they deserved the effort. Imagine, he thought, untying someone's limbs only for them to reach for the rope. He took a deep breath and proceeded downwards.

'Can I go down there, onto the ground?' Blodwyn asked, noting that Llyr was getting close to the boulder.

'Wait,' Llyr pleaded, 'wait a mo.'

Blodwyn backed away as Llyr lowered himself onto the giant rock. He sat and drew his knees into his chest and laughed into his thighs. Blodwyn peered over the rock at the grass below. It looked wet. She hadn't considered that as a possibility, and it caused her to wonder whether the trees would be wet too. They loomed over them from atop the hill. Blodwyn couldn't focus on any individual tree; she found that as soon as she started to identify detail – bark patterns and limb configuration – she lost focus. But that was far better than the sickly dizziness that greeted her every time she tried to take in her immediate surroundings. The rolling green unfolding before them seemed to have several tiny creatures rushing through it, all moving in the same direction as the wind. As Blodwyn glided down the side of the rock, she heard running water somewhere to the side of her. It didn't sound close, but it was consistent. She turned to identify the source but when she stopped, she felt as though her head

kept spinning. The land sloped downwards towards the sound, but the image before her narrowed and spun. Stac, like a grey arm reached around the spinning image and spiralled into it. She closed her eyes and turned away.

‘Nearly there,’ Blodwyn reassured Llyr and she sat on the ground, adopting his pose and rocking in place.

Llyr peered over the side of the rock at Blodwyn sitting below. The smooth sides of the rock were free from any kind of hold. He stood up and attempted to take in his surroundings. His eyes darted about, struggling to take in the vast expanse before him. Clouds swirled in a blue-grey sky and seemed to rush over the land, without a corner or an edge to the sky. It was only defined by what he was able to see. Before he realised it, he groaned, fell backwards off the rock and thudded down next to Blodwyn.

‘Well done,’ she said.

Llyr struggled to laugh as he lay with his eyes closed. His back had taken most of the impact and he was winded. In spite of this, he sat up and continued his laboured laugh as he forced himself to his feet. He carefully backed into the rock and tried to get his breathing under control. As soon as he felt like he could inhale without issue, he opened his eyes. Despite the lessening tears, all the objects around him deteriorated into green or brown blobs. He too tried to identify the source of the rushing water but he couldn’t. Even though he held onto the rock, when he turned to face the view of rolling hills he wanted to fall. It was as though his body rejected the idea of space. The sun crept out from behind a cloud and blinded them both. Every time they opened their eyes the vastness of their surroundings left them feeling drunk but also like they had to run. Standing still was not an option.

‘Blodwyn,’ Llyr said before he stopped.

Llyr couldn't marshal his thoughts. He knew that there was something odd about the noise he just made. It was strange enough for him to feel like making another one but the fear was such that he didn't want to say anything just yet. The sound barrelled away from him. He thought about the noise, simple though it was, escaping his mouth and leaping off ahead of him into the copse at the top of the hill. Why was he thinking about it like that? Had he ever had cause to before? He thought of something similar happening inside Stac and how it could bounce around off the walls forever without leaving. Out in the open, his sounds could travel on forever. The wind was getting up. It struck his bare arms and shins in a way that was, at first, pleasant – somehow carrying a feeling of cleanliness. After a few moments, he realised that wasn't enjoying it. He took a few tentative steps away from Stac and realised that he was panting. He could hear every frantic heartbeat. He turned to look back up at the hole. Someone, with Taidy likely supervising, had already begun the task of filling it, sealing them outside. A face that he couldn't quite recognise dared to peek out from the hole, before shooting back in.

Blodwyn and Llyr looked briefly at each other then back up at the stone wall. Another rock slipped into place filling another portion of the hole. To Blodwyn and Llyr they each seemed like a tiny dot on a green backdrop. They looked at each other and at the copse in turn before heading for it. Neither spoke. Their pace, even up a steep hill, increased. The shadows between the trees spoke to something inside of them both. It was a song of familiarity and safety, despite being somewhere wholly new.

STONE

As they entered the copse, the grass gave way to raw brown earth. Up close, the trees were no longer intimidating, but offered a barrier from the raw size of everything they'd just run through. Llyr waited until he was several trees deep until he touched one. It was thick and firm in his hands. His soft caresses developed into forceful shoves and taps. Although the trunk was hard Llyr thought that it was not as hard as stone. He rubbed the bark up and down, noting the coarse feeling in his palms. Somehow, it felt warmer than stone which didn't make sense. He thought of his twll and how he had to contort himself into an oddly specific shape so that he could get comfortable in his cobbly nook of a bed. But what if it was made of tree bark? It would be coarse but not as unforgiving and potentially warmer. Llyr wondered when he would have his next sleep. When they ran toward the trees, through the lightheaded fog, they had appeared to be moving. But up close they were completely still, just like stone. Llyr followed the tree upward to its top but his eyes shot back down when he caught a glimpse of the sky through its leaves. One thing at a time, he thought.

Blodwyn wasn't nearly as cautious. She sped ahead of Llyr and passed through the trees as well as between them. She shot through layers of bark, wood and sap when she stopped by a particularly large and thick deciduous tree, which had shed its leaves. She carefully led, head first, through the first layer of bark and followed with her torso until she was completely inside the tree. She hoped to feel a strong change in temperature, or softness, or something other than travelling through the air. Of course, she was glad that there was no resistance but as she waited a quiet calm crept up inside her. She remained perfectly still. Being inside the core of the tree gave her a gentle but definite feeling of growth. An almost imperceptibly slow motion of life reaching upwards, through and around her, like a hand stretching out of the earth. It felt like being inside a giant lung as they took an inordinately long time to inhale then exhale. The lung conveyed a simple message: stay a moment, catch

your breath. Blodwyn closed her eyes. She gradually brought her arms down to her sides and, like a tiny core spinning in her centre, she tuned in to the old life, which worked silently and tirelessly at growing. The tree was no longer an object but a being in its own right. Blodwyn beamed an enormous warm smile, behind which she felt the tree's life reaching skyward.

'Blodwyn?' Llyr said. He didn't like how his voice sounded outside, although it was better than last time.

Blodwyn stepped out of the tree. She followed its trunk upward and tried to count the ends of each branch. The sky didn't seem quite as intimidating as it had before and the top of the tree swayed a little in the wind. Blodwyn felt that the tree had learned to move with those influences while staying in place. She swayed, mimicking the branches and in a split second she'd dreamed that the rest of her days could be spent there in communion with the tree.

'I'm here,' she called back to Llyr.

Llyr bounded over to her and they smiled at each other.

'Oh Duw,' Blodwyn said and covered her open mouth with both hands. Llyr turned and through the trees he saw the object of Blodwyn's shock.

Lying between three hilly mounds, like a stony spine bursting out of the valley floor, stood Stac. The top level, which was open behind waist-high crenelation, was mostly even, apart from the occasional turrets and towers rising high above. These vertical extensions had grand windows and shiny ornate decorations. One person polished a gleaming extravagance while another sat and watched. Some windows were wide open. Blodwyn had been captivated by the view and light from something much smaller and she could only imagine the opulence that lay behind those transparent rectangles. Their life, whoever lived there, was clearly spent in the light. Both had known that the levels above were better off than those below but neither had known to what extent. Together, they wondered if these upper levels

were just as clueless as to the lives of those below, literally supporting their height. Either they were ignorant, or they knew and didn't care. Blodwyn and Llyr couldn't decide which was preferable.

Between the spiky protrusions there were people, at least thirty of them, wandering about. Many wore brightly coloured clothing, with reds and yellows ringing out above the others like tiny suns. The rest of them were not unlike the woman who had banished Blodwyn back to her own level. They were presentable but wearing pale colours, seemingly moving about and busying themselves more than the brightly coloured folk were. Some carried baskets that Llyr recognised as being similar to the ones the vegetables were delivered in. Others carried tools. There were a few animals, which were large and covered in black hair. From this distance it was hard to make out much detail other than their general shape but there was nothing about them that suggested ferocity. In fact, it was quite the opposite. Although they were enormous next to a person, in weight and build if not in height, the animals made no quick movements. One person sat on a dividing wall next to their area, observing.

The level just below this had stonework which was almost entirely uniform. There were some windows and Llyr imagined that these people likely travelled upward at the start of the day only to descend at the end of it, much like he had. Some had even angled their windows upward so that the only possible thing in view was a turret rather than the green expanse surrounding Stac. Blodwyn couldn't understand why you would want to obsess upwards when you could look outwards. These middling people likely looked down on everything below them while desperately acting like those above, Llyr thought. He'd seen a similar sort of attitude in previous Doorkeepers.

Below this were the ropes. Llyr had always wanted to know what they were attached to and whether the daily taunts of beautiful views of outside were based in reality. The ropes led out of Stac and were attached to small baskets. He assumed they were raised and lowered to where they needed to be for repair, or, looking at the construction going on above and the hole below, to claim resources. The baskets were motionless but there was a concentration of them above the hole in Capel. Evidently the stone they'd removed had already been recovered, sent upwards and was being worked. Two of the turrets had work crew buzzing around them, they had erected long wooden poles, suggesting the direction and placement of the stone. Blodwyn and Llyr noticed that the turrets tended to gather towards one end of Stac, as though much of the weight was piled up towards one end of the structure. Then, they both gasped.

A giant crack ran right through Stac. It started not far above one of the ancient rocks and led through every level, stopping beneath one of the taller turrets. It seemed all that vertical weight positioned on the one side was taking its toll. It was curious that none of the baskets were aimed at this crack and strange that Llyr and Blodwyn had never encountered it from inside. Was it surface level and slowly ripping its way deeper until it was too late? Were the turret dwellers even aware of it? Llyr answered with a gesture to Blodwyn. He held his hand up in front of his face then mimed it falling over.

Llyr turned away first, then Blodwyn. They'd seen enough.

'Well, where to?' Llyr asked Blodwyn.

'I didn't realise we were joined at the hip,' Blodwyn laughed.

In the fading light scattered through the trees she looked wholly alive, until the occasional see-through blotch moved over her face and down her neck, like an almost transparent spot which travelled around her body. Llyr had, of course, seen it before but this

time it was bigger and about the size of a large apple. He wondered if she knew and if she did, what that felt like. Was it just like a piece of her falling away? Had she noticed? Should he point it out?

‘Might as well stick together, no?’ Llyr held his hands open before him at the suggestion and he watched as the transparent patch, the missing jigsaw piece, moved around to the centre of Blodwyn’s forehead.

‘Yeah, I thought as much myself really,’ Blodwyn agreed, smiling through the corner of her mouth.

‘To be honest, I hadn’t thought this far ahead,’ Llyr paused and looked around. The copse had edges to it, but he couldn’t understand its overall shape. He felt like he was in the grip of the branches. ‘I’ve wanted out for as long as I can remember. But it is odd. Duw. I don’t have a clue about any of this or what to do really.’ Llyr looked lost.

‘I’m with you. I mean, I understand. I had no idea about the colour. You won’t understand, yet, but when everything else has gone you don’t have much left to... I just want more of that, whatever it is. You know?’

‘Not really, but I want to,’ Llyr said. He tried comprehend what she was saying.

‘I just wanted to-’ Blodwyn inhaled deeply and looked dejected. She knew that the closer she got, the more she would want to really feel something. Routine confrontation of her inability to touch was potentially all that faced her outside. She knew that it wasn’t just that. It wasn’t just the will to see something different, vibrant and new. There was something altogether more powerful and unspoken. It lay beneath their feet in the earth, in the sunlight surrounding them, in the shadows behind trees and it was carried on the wind.

‘It’s different isn’t it,’ Llyr said and inhaled. ‘It’s fresh but not as cold as inside. And there’s all these tiny smells. They’re coming and going for me and I don’t know what they are. Does each individual tree have a different scent? Or is that the grass?’ He inhaled again, so deeply that he coughed.

Blodwyn smiled. ‘I can tell you one thing though; I’m not going back in there. I don’t even want to look at it.’

‘I think, well, I’m having trouble trying to say but-’

‘Go on,’ Blodwyn interrupted.

Llyr sighed and paced about on the spot a little. Once again, he drank in his surroundings and stole another look at the sky. He’d never seen anything so vast. To think that he’d spent his entire life inside Stac, which now looked tiny against the landscape, was unbelievable. Each way he looked through the copse, the trees scattered about in no particular pattern. Yet, at the same time he felt that there was a rhythm to these features. All of the tiny organic moments he’d felt – the occasional scent of wet deciduous leaves, the faint tickle as branches gently collided overhead – they echoed inside him. He felt their influence deep into his bones. But it couldn’t be that it was his body that had this connection. He could tell from the look on Blodwyn’s face that it was something deeper than flesh.

‘Let’s just... go,’ he offered.

‘Go? Go where?’ Blodwyn countered.

‘Just,’ Llyr paused and he looked confused by his own concept, ‘go,’ he added and he closed his eyes for a long moment.

‘Ok,’ Blodwyn said, beginning to understand, ‘so, we, go,’ she placed the same emphasis on the word that Llyr did. He smiled back at her.

‘Yes, and heading away from that,’ he pointed, without looking, at Stac, ‘is as good a direction as any.’

‘Hang on,’ Blodwyn replied as she angrily stared over Llyr’s shoulder, further up the hill.

Between the treeline at the edge of the copse was a blunt rounded shape. It was almost as tall as Llyr but twice as wide and it stood up like an incisor, with the ground swelling up around it like swollen gums around a sore tooth. A sparrow was perched on top. It could easily be missed, but Blodwyn had honed in on it and approached cautiously. Llyr thought that she needn’t have acted so carefully, especially as she only made a noise if she wished to, give that her movements were silent.

‘There,’ Blodwyn said and Llyr followed.

Somehow, Llyr blocked out the object and focussed on the bird. He tapped his own feather, still secured in its folded rag in his waistband. This was nothing like the crude carving he had applied to a wall as a child. Its sudden movements and fine lines compelled him to rush towards the tiny bird. He thought he could get to observe it up close. There was something about its colouring, not at all uniform and even from several feet away he could make out the autumnal subtleties. As he passed Blodwyn and neared the stone the sparrow took flight. He stood still in awe as he watched it ascend out of the copse and dart about, jumping between unseen ledges.

Blodwyn didn’t pay any attention to Llyr’s behaviour, concentrating only on moving toward the stone. Once she was about eight feet away, what she deemed to be a safe distance, she slowed to a crawl. No runes, no symbols of any kind, just a stoic grey lump. Still, as she neared, she found that there was some mossy weathering to the top of the stone, which was unlike anything she’d seen inside Stac. She held a hand outstretched, pushing it a little way

into the stone, but found nothing. She willed it to do something and react to her limb which was now sunk up to her elbow in the obelisk. Still nothing. However, instead of being overjoyed at the realisation that, this place wasn't some extension of Stac or a Rune-marked waypoint, a small knot of fear settled in her mind. It was unknown. It hadn't done what she had expected. So now, it could do anything.

Llyr circled around to the front of the stone. He caressed its front and he too expected ancient shapes with forgotten meaning to come crawling across the surface and for it to light up but nothing. Instead, his hand traced downwards and met Blodwyn's as hers came out the front.

'Nothing on this side either,' Llyr said, confused.

'What do you suppose it is?' Blodwyn asked.

'I don't know, just a stone I guess?' Llyr said, losing confidence with every uttered word.

'But look around, it isn't like the trees, is it? Stones don't just grow out of the ground. Do they?'

Both looked along the treeline. Llyr had to admit, even if only to himself at first that no, it didn't really look like it had come out of the ground in the same way as a tree. For one thing, there were no visible roots.

'No of course not. Look at Stac. I mean, ignoring Tad Carreg, sorry Tad, but that didn't just grow up. It was made.' Llyr noted Stac was a bit less visible from here that it was before. They must have travelled over the crest of the hill and Stac, thankfully, was mostly obscured by earth and trees.

'So, what is this then, if it too was just made or put here?'

‘An accident?’ Llyr laughed at his own terrible suggestion.

‘I don’t know,’ Blodwyn paused then spoke quickly, ‘but I don’t like it. Let’s go. Let’s do the *go*.’

Ahead of them the land undulated and rolled downhill where a thick and dense forest stretched for as far as they could see. Apart from one bare bald spot sticking out high above the trees, a green dome poking out over a sea of brown. The forest folded before them like an ancient map. As soon as they thought they’d identified one plateau, it rose or dipped. It was as though the land was still performing a morning stretch and hadn’t quite reached its apex yet. Branches danced in the wind. Every reasonably sized gap in the treeline looked like an inviting path.

‘There,’ Blodwyn said and set off toward the trees.

GO

A narrow strip, like a river of grass, lay between them and the forest. Their eyes darted left and right. The weight of each green blade, weed, bush and tree, against the backdrop of a seemingly endless sky, threw itself upon them. Llyr hated that his whole life had been linear; living in tunnels and corridors in which the only direction was forward or backward, with no space around him. The exception, of course, was the Rope Chamber, but that was a space of purpose and one in which any movement was under supervision. It might as well have been a tunnel. Outside, his field of vision stretched not just in front of him but also to either side. His instinctive response, one which he had to make constant effort to override, was to find a corner, preferably with a roof where he could safely observe for a while. The grass rolled downward and the hill seemed steeper on his left than to his right where the descent was more gradual. He wanted the gentler option, to allow him to experience the openness before heading back into the safety of the forest. A cold and pragmatic portion of his brain decided that the severe descent would be quicker and therefore safer. He followed countless tiny creatures which, formed by the wind, ran through the grass. In one gust they urged him onward with their speed and between the wind's breaths they were gone.

Blodwyn was easy to follow as she couldn't run even if she wanted. She thought Llyr playfully shot through her on their way to the treeline, but he had lost control down the hill. He wasn't used to running and soon his legs tangled up underneath him. Blodwyn couldn't help but laugh at how panic stricken he seemed. Once the ground levelled out, he thudded onto his back giving Blodwyn the chance to pass him. Llyr allowed the dizziness to dissipate before he tried to get up but as he did, he saw one of clouds had fallen from the sky, or so he thought. Blodwyn noticed it too and she stopped. To her, it looked like a shadow was forming a short way up the treeline. It swirled into a writhing mass of hooved legs. It whinnied. A long-nosed head formed out of one end of the mass. It shook, and with the motion, the mane

formed joined a long neck. As the cloud moved forward, it gained more necks and heads. With every inch of motion, it changed from a shapeless cloud into a herd of horses. Eyes blinked into existence before their owners brayed and trotted.

The horses moved past Llyr and Blodwyn like water around a rock. Their long-dead musculature was clearly defined through their chestnut coats. Llyr thought they were speaking to each other when they brayed and he wanted to mimic the sound but he was unable to speak. Blodwyn gasped as she and Llyr watched the last of the tails seesawing as they crested the hill.

‘Wow,’ Blodwyn muttered, ‘so beautiful. But, what on earth is that?’ Blodwyn said, knowing Llyr wouldn’t have the answer.

‘No idea,’ Llyr replied, ‘but we needn’t worry about it. It felt very... tranquil.’

‘How so?’ Blodwyn asked, backing further into the woods as Llyr neared.

‘Hard to explain really.’ Llyr watched as the last tail disappeared through the copse.

‘Bet it was an Afanc, no, apparently they live in water,’ Blodwyn muttered under her breath.

‘What was that?’ Llyr chuckled.

‘Nothing.’

‘Come on,’ Llyr pleaded.

‘Ok well. When I was little, people, Taidy’s Taid, sometimes talked about stuff outside,’ Blodwyn mimicked the tone of a knowing old man, ‘there’s things out there that you could hardly believe.’

‘Oh,’ Llyr said flatly. The Taidy he knew never mentioned animals. He was always too busy fixing or ‘tinkering’ with something as he put it. ‘Outside huh?’ he said and felt a small knot of jealousy tied up inside his stomach. It soon untied and reformed itself as anger, aimed at those who came before him and threw knowledge away.

Llyr walked a little way past Blodwyn and examined the trees. The woods seemed thicker when viewed from the hill. But still, there was something about being surrounded by trees comforted him. He took a few cautious steps in through the treeline. Whinnies echoed from the copse above them and he smiled.

‘Well, there weren’t many that did really,’ Blodwyn continued. ‘Just a couple of oldies, their twll was near ours and sometimes they’d look after me and tell me about outside.’ She followed Llyr deeper into the woods. ‘None of them ever went or saw or anything. But they said it was important to keep telling the stories.’

‘Really? Well, how did they know?’ Llyr asked and he picked a tree branch up off the floor and inspected the pattern of the bark up close.

‘I don’t suppose they did really. Because they never left. But they said their parents told them and so on. Then it was usually followed up with a bunch of Tad Carreg praising. Why he’d given us our home. Usual stuff really. I didn’t really pay attention to it. Or at least, I didn’t think I had. It was too long ago.’

‘Bet you wish you had now,’ Llyr said as he gently placed the branch back down on the forest floor.

‘Not really, how would they know. It would just be speculation,’ Blodwyn paused, ‘surely.’

Llyr dared to look at the sky. ‘Got to wonder though, what happens when the light fades,’ he murmured and grew uneasy of the little pit of fear growing in his stomach.

‘It goes dark,’ Blodwyn laughed.

Llyr laughed too but he looked up again. It seemed that every time he did the clouds cleared and the sky darkened, forcing the shadows between the trees to thicken and spread. A dark sky was easier to behold. Each of Llyr’s stolen glances at the sky lasted longer than the previous one.

A faint sound of rushing water whispered through the woods. Blodwyn and Llyr stopped and looked at each other for a long moment. Blodwyn had no need of water but she was as intrigued by its presence as Llyr. As soon as she heard it, she felt a strong pull in its direction. Llyr hadn’t registered his thirst but every time they stopped to make sure they were going towards the sound; he found it harder to swallow. The forest floor was mostly made up of dried earth with the occasional spot of thick mud. Blodwyn could only marvel at Llyr and the way he examined his feet after his first encounter with an earthy puddle. It felt cool, but not cold and he wasn’t entirely sure how he felt about it seeping up between his toes. He felt he had to try and grip into the mud with his feet to be sure. Blodwyn smirked. He couldn’t stay entertained by this for long, the endless trickle permeated their every thought.

On their side, the bank was stony but it gradually gave way to mud somewhere underneath the water. The other bank was sheer and muddy and between them the water raced by. There were three rocky islets in the river which stood proud of the current. On the furthest one, there was a tiny sapling reaching out.

Llyr took off his gnarled sackcloth shoes and tip-toed into the water. It wasn’t particularly deep, only coming up to mid-shin. He waded out to one of the rocky islets and sat down. He wasn’t at all put off by the cold, which if anything, aided his aching feet. He

rubbed them clean in the current before taking great care over his hands and face. Peering down at his own murky reflection, he tried to resist an overwhelming urge. In the back of his mind, he meekly admitted defeat to the feeling.

‘Excuse me,’ he said quietly to Blodwyn.

Llyr shovelled handfuls of water up to his face and gulped. Water splashed down his front and onto his lap but he wasn’t deterred. He gave up with his delivery system and opted to crouch down on all fours and shove his face into the flow. With one eye closed and submerged and the other above the surface he drank all he could handle. He tried to laugh between gulps but all Blodwyn heard was another gurgle. When he’d drunk his fill, he buried his head in the water and washed his hair.

He bobbed his head above water, inhaled and sunk back down again. He did this several times, before removing his clothes, taking great care to make sure that the little parcel containing his feather was dry and secure, and planted himself in the flow. Sitting down, the water came up above his waist. He muttered something before lying down in the current, laughing and splashing water over his navel. Blodwyn laughed with him and he remembered, that while he wasn’t sharing this with anyone, he wasn’t alone. He stood up and felt, as if for the first time in his life, truly clean. Though he had bathed in the river, he now felt like his skin bathed in the night air. He felt raw, almost pained but at the same time new, like a fresh shard of flint ready to carve.

‘Sorry,’ he said, wiping away a tear. ‘I don’t know what came over me.’

‘Don’t worry,’ Blodwyn smiled, ‘I remember.’

Llyr craned his neck back and high above them several lights twinkled. Llyr gasped and Blodwyn followed his gaze. Neither could tell if the lights were moving. Then, they tried to count them but the forest canopy interfered. While the lights weren’t actually twinkling,

they reasoned that it wasn't just a portion of the sky overhead, it was the entire thing. The river and the forest floor around them were bathed in a moonlit glow. The sky was nearly full and Llyr thought, entirely different to daylight. It was much kinder to the eyes.

‘Blodwyn,’ Llyr said through chattering teeth, ‘I’m freezing.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ she looked around for a solution.

It had been so long since this was a problem she faced that she didn't really know what to do. She watched Llyr cover up his bony body with his clothes and paused for a moment when she saw his curious parcel. He tapped it three times in a way that seemed to reassure him, before he tucked it into the waistband of his shorts. Anything that she thought of for warmth seemed ridiculous, until Llyr said one of the things that she was thinking.

‘I’ll gather up a load of tree bits and cover myself up I guess. Only other thing would be to keep moving.’

‘Well, I can keep moving, but don’t you need sleep?’

‘I do but I’d rather be a bit warmer before I try.’

Both were used to the dark and felt like they could see better in the moonlight. Neither of them was aware of when, but the sounds in the forest changed seemingly in a matter of seconds. Branches still creaked and clattered together but there were sporadic screeches from overhead, high up in the trees. Sometimes they corresponded with the sound of something dashing along the floor ahead of them. Other times, the screech moved from overhead to much lower down, almost to their feet, growing in the absence of light. All the while the river gently bubbled.

A large hoot, right above their heads, was followed by total silence. Llyr and Blodwyn stopped walking and remained motionless. Both looked for the source of the sound,

but it was cloaked in darkness. The river came into focus again, then the gentle tickle of branches overhead, followed by a sharp beat of wings, a flutter so fast that it was over just as it was registered.

‘What do you think that was?’ Blodwyn asked.

Llyr turned to where he thought Blodwyn was, but he couldn’t see anything. Suddenly, he was aware of his breathing – sharp breaths accompanied his increased heartrate. The cold was more pronounced on his face and forehead than anywhere else, but even so, he found himself wiping away sweat.

‘I don’t know,’ he whispered and looked around for a friendly reply.

The moonlight cast the shadows of surrounding trees right through Blodwyn. Llyr could just about see her outline. She was roughly where he expected her to be, alongside him, if not slightly ahead. Whenever he looked away, he immediately lost her and he’d have to assemble her outline in the shadows.

Blodwyn hadn’t recovered from her realisation about the trees. The amount of life around her was overwhelming. She thought back to the Wall Man, who was the remnants of a life stuck fast in dead, or at least dying, stone. She didn’t want to debate the life of Tad Carreg, the Runes or anything in between. But it wasn’t lost on her that she was the singular death submerged in life. It was the reverse situation. Crucially though, she could move. Ever since meeting him, the thought of losing her mobility forced her into motion. She passed through a large ash tree. The moonlight panned over her path and showed trees and foliage in every direction and no way of knowing where Llyr and Blodwyn had come from. If she became stuck like The Wall Man, she thought, but to a tree or a mound, would that be so bad? They hadn’t seen any children who would come and talk to her. She recalled the tree

and its deep rhythm and, in an instant, she wanted to feel the pattern, the pulse of every tree in the forest. There were worse places to be stuck. Even so, she had to keep moving.

A scream shot through the woods and echoed around the pair.

They stopped. It sounded like a woman being attacked, though no assailant was heard. The scream came again. It was a terrified one, they were sure of that. Llyr, abandoning the river bank, ran towards the sound. He didn't like how untrustworthy sound was outside. In Stac, noises were either ahead of you or behind. Corridors and hallways funnelled life into linear paths. The scream came again and it barrelled around every tree Llyr saw. The pace was uncomfortable for Blodwyn and she couldn't keep up, but soon, Llyr ran out of breath. The next scream sounded like it came from much further away. They were still in pursuit when they heard something else. This sound was right next to them. Something darted through a group of bushes and it sounded like it scrambled up a tree.

'Maybe we should-' Llyr started and Blodwyn interrupted.

'Just for the night, but let's go back down by the river. It's darker here.'

PATHS

Llyr opened his eyes. A large, thick juniper bush knelt on the opposite riverbank. It dipped its uppermost branches in the water and its limbs rubbed around under the surface of the current. Even in the weak light of an overcast dawn, it was inordinately green against the backdrop of brown tree trunks and the forest floor. Against his tree, Llyr straightened up.

‘It’s been there for a few minutes now,’ Blodwyn whispered from inside the tree.

‘Thanks for leaving me out here with it,’ Llyr whispered back through gritted teeth.

‘I don’t know what it is do I? and before you say it, no, I know you don’t either but who knows how it’ll feel about me,’ Blodwyn snapped back.

Both tried to recall if they’d seen anything like it the previous day. The bush, still washing its unseen face, was too green. The first thing that popped into Llyr’s mind was the woman’s scream. He hadn’t seen a bush on his run, just more endless brown. Blodwyn too thought about the scream and she half expected the bush was responsible. The bush raised its head out of the river and sat on the bank. Two thick brown trunks extended out of the main body of green and plunged into the water.

‘Ah,’ it sighed.

‘We either run or I attack it,’ Llyr whispered.

‘I was just about to say that,’ Blodwyn replied.

Llyr silently got to his feet. ‘The river will slow it down, let’s run.’

‘Ok,’ Blodwyn agreed, exiting the tree.

‘Bore da, I was wondering when you’d be up,’ the bush said.

It reached up and removed the top portion of greenery, revealing a male face. He was in his forties, with black hair and an unkempt beard. Llyr and Blodwyn filled in humanoid bits into the bush shape. The trunks were legs, between the branches there were filthy hands and beyond them thick hairy arms.

‘Nice spo’ here, I was around here a year or two ago as well. Au’umn seemed a bi’ colder that year,’ he picked pieces of debris out of his branches as he spoke.

‘Yes,’ Llyr replied, too bewildered to follow it up.

‘Knew I’d bump into someone on the way but you gave me a frigh’,’ he laughed.

Blodwyn returned behind Llyr’s shoulder. The bush man smiled and nodded at her. He took off the branches covering his arms and shoulders and started to wash his limbs in the river. The dirt streaking his forearms proved difficult to remove.

‘Why are you dressed like that?’ Blodwyn asked.

‘For the animals. ‘Lot of ‘em won’t le’ you ge’ close. This way, I can ge’ close.’

‘Why do you want to do that?’ Blodwyn asked.

Llyr patted the package in his waistband. The way over his shoulder and beyond Blodwyn was clear. He plotted the initial steps of his run when he remembered that Blodwyn likely couldn’t keep up. The man removed the rest of his bush outfit leaving it in a neat pile on the bank.

‘Look at ‘em, I jus’ likes to look at ‘em. Couple of foxes ran through ear las’ nigh’ surprised you didn’ ‘ear ‘em. They sleeps nearby see,’ he imitated the scream.

Llyr and Blodwyn stared open-mouthed at the man. He laughed as he waded through the river towards them with his outfit tucked under one arm. Blodwyn backed away a little and Llyr followed. He chuckled at their reaction as he exited the river.

‘Bryn,’ he smiled at Llyr.

He was a full head taller than Llyr, even without his head covering. By Stac standards, Llyr was tall, and so he was somewhat in awe of the size Bryn.

‘Llyr and Blodwyn,’ Blodwyn replied.

‘Goin’ the mee’in’ then?’ Bryn smiled at them.

‘What meeting?’ Llyr replied.

‘Usual, come on, you’re los’?’

‘Lost?’

‘Yeah, one of us like.’

‘Yeah,’ Blodwyn chimed in without thinking, ‘Yeah we are.’

‘See you there then,’ Bryn said and he set off. ‘You’re welcome ‘o join me,’ he said as he reassembled his head covering.

‘We’re alright,’ Blodwyn replied.

‘Alrigh’. Only, I don’ recall seeing you at the mee’in before?’ Bryn said and stood looking at Blodwyn and Llyr. It was impossible to see his expression.

‘Then again, maybe I did,’ he added, nodding before turning away from them.

Bryn waved, without facing them or breaking his gait. The pair watched in silence as he rambled between trees until he disappeared, wondering, as he walked away how they were

ever fooled by his outfit. They could just about make out the outline of a path that Bryn had used. An earthen line led through the trees worn into the earth by countless deer. Blodwyn looked at Llyr then nodded at the line.

‘I mean,’ Llyr paused and looked around. The gaps and distances between trees seemed different. The forest was more spacious than it previously seemed. It had to be the growing light. ‘We have the choice; we can go anywhere.’

‘Are we still on for the hill?’ Blodwyn asked.

‘I don’t see why not, also that path seems to be going uphill. Look.’

Blodwyn had already seen. The land sloped upward in a gentle gradient and the path followed the contours. Neither wanted to follow Bryn, so they let him get ahead. Once he was out of sight, they could fool themselves that he may not even be using the same path. A brief glance at the wood around them again confirmed that they were somewhere far larger than either of them ever imagined. Bryn could be anywhere and the options were endless. *Go* wasn’t about following people, but at some point footsteps were bound to overlap.

‘What do we think?’ Blodwyn asked.

‘I’m not sure. We should keep going but I don’t want to just walk in his shadow.’ Llyr replied.

‘Agreed. I just don’t want to take up with the first person. Or anyone really.’

Llyr nodded.

The river bubbled behind them. They stared at each other for a moment whilst trees creaked overhead. Llyr considered staying there, wondering why they felt the urgent need to press on? He could build something out of wood, possibly up in one of the trees. He imagined leaning several branches together so it formed a skirt around the base of a tree. He could have

an endless supply of water right by his bed. Did he even need to settle? That's not something he'd thought before. Other people rarely featured in Llyr's ideas of outside. It was mostly a daydream of space, light and water in abundance and never having to stoop low or pull a rope again. His stomach rumbled.

Blodwyn was scared of staying still. In the silence growing between them, she'd started to sway, thinking about what lay over the next crest. What does the forest eventually give way to? A sequence of textures sped through her mind: stone, cloth, grass, bark. She couldn't feel any of them. But she saw. More and further than would have ever been possible in Stac. More in the last day than in the previous several decades. She'd have to be careful about her speed but it seemed that *Go* could be slow.

'Ok I'm confused. Do we follow it?' Llyr asked.

'What happened to *Go*?' Blodwyn replied.

'We can get right back on *Go* as soon as we see where this leads,' Llyr replied.

The path curved between trees and through pools of light. It was like they'd been gifted a thread of understanding through the forest. At times it thinned to the width of one of Llyr's feet, which was preferable to opening out into a large clearing where the path was lost and new threads were woven through the forest. As the ground levelled, the river sounded closer. Llyr sensed that he enjoyed the water a great deal more than Blodwyn ever could.

He patted the package in his waistband.

'At some point you're going to tell me what that is,' Blodwyn said playfully.

Llyr was about to reply when a large splash came from upstream. Ahead of them, a woman waded through the water and got out the other side. She wore clothes similar to Llyr's ragged sackcloth, though she had more layers. She took off her torn trousers, shook them and

squeezed the water out of each leg. She rolled them up and shoved them into a backpack, out of which she took a pair of shorts. Both watched her, speechless. She wandered along the pine needle floor until she was almost out of sight when she stopped. She bent over and checked the floor; she looked back down along the path and then ahead of her. Seemingly satisfied, she carried on and out of sight.

‘Slow, ok? Just slow,’ Blodwyn said.

‘You set the pace,’ Llyr replied.

In the shadow of the barren hill lay a natural tunnel formed by trees. To the left, the land sloped toward the river, which had narrowed, forcing the current to race past them, whipping white foam over the rocks. To the right of the tunnel, the hillside steeply rose and joined that of the barren hill. The tunnel, though brown with spots of autumn colour where a few leaves had clung on, echoed Stac.

Blodwyn looked up to inspect the tree coverage. It was dense here and in the shadow of the hill it was much darker. It was as though they’d walked back in time a few hours and it was still night. Over her head, something fluttered into a tree branch. She too took a few steps out into the tunnel and looked back. It was a stocky bird with large round eyes. The huge yellow eyes blinked and peered down at her before blinking again and staring off to something else in the trees.

The tunnel curved around the barren hill and stopped at a final steep ascent. Llyr and Blodwyn re-entered into the sunlight. They kept a close eye on the summit, which so far still seemed as empty as it had from the other side of the forest. Llyr slowed down on the ascent. Even though they weren’t going at a fast pace, he wasn’t used to walking this far or for this long. A fox darted over the top of the hill; Blodwyn marvelled at its white tipped tail as it disappeared down the steep bank. Llyr was too busy staring at his own feet to notice.

‘What’s up?’ Blodwyn asked.

‘I’m just, it’s hard work,’ he stopped to catch his breath. ‘And I can’t remember the last thing I ate.’

‘Llyr,’ she whispered, ‘don’t you think this is a bit, you know, odd? There are all these animals. I had no idea that there would be so many.’

‘Maybe a bit, I hadn’t expected them to be so colourful,’ he replied in a similarly quiet fashion. ‘I don’t know but, isn’t there some part of you that wants to touch,’ he paused, ‘to see more of them?’ Llyr countered.

A distinct but faint splash came from the river. Blodwyn turned away from Llyr and peered back down through the tunnel. A woman walked into view. She was tall and slight with thick frizzy black hair. She was looking around with a furrowed brow.

‘Llyr,’ Blodwyn whispered, ‘someone is coming.’

Llyr saw the woman, nodded at Blodwyn then darted off to the closest tree. He ran into the treeline and caught his breath as he spied the woman climbing. Blodwyn crouched inside a tree.

The stranger wasn’t in a hurry. She zigzagged up the incline at a slow pace, humming as she went. It was not a song that the pair recognised. The humming grew louder and the occasional word came out until she was right next to Llyr and Blodwyn.

‘...the first light until the going down and even then it’s all around...’ she hummed the next part before she continued, *‘...kicking up fresh fallen snow or shimmering from summer’s glow...’*

Despite her lackadaisical approach, she soon passed the pair and they peered out from their respective hiding places to witness her as she neared the summit. She paused to reach

over her head, plucking a series of small wild plums, still humming all the while. She popped one into her mouth and chewed. Llyr salivated as he watched her disappear over the horizon.

‘I’ve got to get one of those,’ he said to himself.

‘Be careful,’ Blodwyn counselled.

With newfound energy Llyr sped up the hill and seized a handful of the wild plums. He couldn’t believe that there was food in the trees and wondered how much he had already ignored. He crunched one. It was sour, much more so than he expected but the second bite was less severe and by the third plum he didn’t really notice the taste. Blodwyn laughed as Llyr gorged himself. She wandered on ahead and gasped at the sight from the summit.

Llyr, chewing his umpteenth plum, nearly spat out some of the sour flesh. Ahead in the distance was another hairless hill. But between them and it, after what looked like quite a steep descent, an immeasurable shimmering glistened through the trees.

SLACK

Llyr's knees strained as he tried to stop the surging downward momentum. Blodwyn followed cautiously; both were fixated on the source of shimmering. They rounded a steep curve in the hillside and where the ground levelled. The forest thinned out as a natural path unfolded from the staggered treeline. It fell between them and grew wider still, enough for half a dozen people. Discarded pine needles and earth gave way to pebbles. Retreating waves revealed thin patches of grey sand and grit. The lake stretched before them like an enormous black tongue.

'It is...' Blodwyn started and stopped. She had no idea what 'it' was – far too large for a river and without a visible current or direction. Wave after wave delicately folded over the pebbles, it seemed much darker than anything she'd seen before and she assumed that had something to do with its size.

'Enormous,' Llyr added after the lengthy silence.

They both saw that on the other side was yet more forest. Llyr acknowledged his urge to undress and run in the water again but the size prevented him from committing. It ran for almost as long as he could see, with trees occasionally dotting the sides and the far edge. Its width wasn't unimpressive either. Despite jogging back, a little way further up the beach and taking a vantage point atop a rock, Llyr still couldn't both sides at once. The banks were steep and sometimes they consisted of smooth rocks that were impossible to climb. It seemed to Llyr that he and Blodwyn stood on the only gradual descent into the water. The waves echoed Llyr's realisation, covering, and then revealing a thin strip of beach.

Blodwyn was unsure too. Although she felt that fearing such things was childlike, fear usually came from innocence or ignorance. However, there was something in the watery darkness that moved her to look away. The sun, though low in the sky, was free from the

trees and when it managed to break through the overcast day the lake shimmered.

Unobstructed, without the presence of walls and rooves, the sky bludgeoned you with freedom. It was too big and too vast. Light made its way to everything and everywhere. Even in thickened forest, it wasn't truly dark. Not like Stac. But here, the water defiantly shone back at the sky. Blodwyn still wasn't comfortable out in the open, but she preferred that to whatever lay in the water. It beckoned with each wave.

A little way out from the beach is where it began – a feeling of swallowing, of depth beyond their control and loss. It was as though they stood on teeth in an enormous mouth and they stared at the black hole of a throat. Blodwyn tried to look over the surface, focus again on the trees or the horizon but the great glut between them drew her eye again and she could almost feel the pull towards it. Llyr found his thoughts drifting towards, once again, the idea of entry. He imagined undressing and walking into the crisp, blue depths, just like he had in the river. The image was shattered and replaced by his feet kicking against silt and endless darkness.

'I don't know,' Blodwyn said quietly, almost hoping Llyr wouldn't hear. 'I don't like it.'

Llyr threw a pebble as hard as he could across the water. It made a sinister gollop as it was swallowed. Any ripples the pebble had caused were unidentifiable. Neither of them wanted to think about it, yet they had the same image of the pebble disappearing into infinite black.

'I don't like it either,' Llyr replied.

Blodwyn led the way down the beach.

Despite the fear, they both stole glances back at the surface. They took reassuring steps further away from it and noted the perpetually wet beach, briefly revealed as each wave

prepared for its return. Neither was sure if that line was defined or if the water made incremental encroachments on the land. Each time they looked, it seemed that the damp patches had grown.

Both Blodwyn and Llyr felt that something was watching them from under the surface. The beach ended abruptly at a stony ridge, which they followed upwards. They were parallel with the water but at least a foot higher. To their right, the land ascended too steeply for Llyr to walk comfortably. His ankles were already feeling the strain of having to walk along the ridge. He briefly considered soaking his feet in the water, but as soon as he looked at it, it glared back, daring him to act.

‘We can follow the edge maybe, it looks alright at the other end,’ Llyr called and tried not to look at the lake.

‘It is difficult to tell though, from here,’ Blodwyn drifted effortlessly up the ridge. ‘Hold on,’ she called back over her shoulder.

An open plain lay out before her, a green sea, which folded in dips and bumps like an unmade bed. Goats grazed in little groups and some of them had kids. The distinct lack of solidity to some of the grazing beasts told Blodwyn that some of them had passed on into their second life. No sooner had she identified it, they either adopted a fuller appearance or faded from view. She couldn’t count how many there were in total, let alone how many of them were deceased. As she was trying to discern a number, a quiet voice popped up in a faraway corner of her mind – why does it matter? They aren’t bothered, so why are you? She released her desire to discern a number and allowed herself to enjoy the spectacle of freedom these creatures had. They mixed without a care for who was alive and who wasn’t. They were without fences and walls. A pair of kids bounded through her, their mother bleating after them before bending down to graze on a lengthy tuft of grass.

Blodwyn turned and traced the two kids as they gambolled over and down the ridge. As they tumbled into the black water, one narrowly missed a struggling Llyr. Once enveloped in the inky blackness, the kids bobbed towards the shore, meeting the steep bank and bouncing back in.

Llyr clumsily slid down the ridge. Blodwyn could only watch from the top as he rolled up to the water's edge and reached in for the nearest stricken kid. He grabbed the first one by the scruff of its neck and it, seemingly in sync with Llyr, attempted to jump out just as he pulled. It took a diagonal path up the ridge and disappeared. The next kid approached the edge, but bobbed away from Llyr's hand. Each time it sunk further into the water. Panicked bleating was muffled by the lake lapping over the kid's skull. Llyr muttered some obscenities, wondering what the kid was, let alone why he tried to rescue it. But, he wiped his hand dry on his clothes and tried again.

Dragging himself even closer to the water, most of his torso hung off the bank, with only his legs and one hand clawing at dry land. He managed to seize the kid, but it twisted out of his grip and slid further away. Its paddling had grown frantic as it swam in a desperate circle near the bank. Llyr lost his balance and tipped towards the water. The black surface glared back at him. He was paralysed. There wasn't a single part of his body that wanted to move, no matter how hard he tried to turn away from the water. He was dragged towards it until his nose broke the surface.

The kid swam into Llyr's free hand and he wrenched it up, before rolling over onto his back. It flipped over him and thudded onto the floor. It lay completely still, the scruff of its neck still trapped in Llyr's grip. Panic thudded through Llyr's throat. The kid rolled over and got to its feet. On shaking legs, it wobbled up the ridge and disappeared with a bleat.

'Well done,' Blodwyn called from the top of the ridge.

‘Bloody thing,’ Llyr chuckled.

Ahead of them in the centre of the lake, for the briefest moment, a dark blob rose up above the surface. It appeared to swell in size, rising further and neither Blodwyn or Llyr were sure of what that meant. Was it actually getting bigger or was it – whatever it was – just moving towards them? Suddenly, it slipped back underneath. It was over before it started. Neither were sure they’d seen anything at all. They looked at each other, knowing what the other would ask. Yes, they’d seen it. No, they didn’t know what it was. No, it wasn’t there anymore and no, they weren’t sure it was there before either.

‘We’d better keep going you know,’ Llyr said. He didn’t know why, but he felt stupid for saying it.

Looking out across the water, he felt even more ridiculous for fearing the water. The lake growled back at that thought with a gentle bubble as yet another wave slapped into the edge beside him. Llyr shook his hands and wiped them dry on his stomach. He looked back up at where he thought the blob had been. Nothing.

Blodwyn had lost track of the kids, who were now unidentifiable amongst the others. They were lost with the other bleating white clouds lolling around on a blanket of green.

Scanning the lake, it was impossible to tell whether the water had drawn in or not, although the beach was still empty. Then came the pull, the tangible draw towards it, again. It ran from his heart to the infinite darkness below the surface. The image flashed up again in his mind – feet kicking against a nothingness so deep it could swallow Stac and every tree he’d ever seen whole.

‘Look, why don’t you come up here? It is flatter and further away from...’ She didn’t finish, she just nodded at the water.

‘Yeah sure, give me a hand,’ Llyr laughed and mockingly reached out with a hand as he scaled the ridge. He wasn’t far from the top when he fell, entering the lake feet first.

Llyr’s head bobbed under the surface several times. As he kicked towards the shore, he attempted to stand on anything he could find. With each kick, he felt that there might be something solid underneath him. He willed it into existence, but nothing came. Helplessly, Blodwyn watched. All she could do was shout encouragement. Llyr managed to scrape the rocky bank with his fingertips. With a few consecutive successful kicks, he was close enough to grip it, pulling himself towards dry land. With a great effort, he hauled himself out of the water and lay on the bank staring up at the sky. The open sky seemed much less sinister now. When he was able, he stood up and looked out over the lake. Something was in there; he was convinced of that and he could feel its sinister smile through the shimmering surface from somewhere in its dark limitless depths. Llyr and Blodwyn ascended the bank together and walked with the goats for the length of the lake.

At the other end of the lake there was the beginning of another forest where a number of trees had been felled. Unlike any of the fallen trees they’d seen in the previous forest, these had been cut down with axes and saws. There was a small pile of logs ready to be used, but in front of them was the frame foundations for a large building. Worked logs lay in a large rectangular shape on the floor. A few dishevelled tents remained, billowing in the light breeze. The site was otherwise empty. Llyr couldn’t tell how recently the logs had been felled, but when Blodwyn entered them, she couldn’t feel that telltale slow growth of the tree. She grieved for the stumps. Looking through the tents the only thing they found was a tiny pendant. Llyr almost missed it. Blodwyn had already left when it caught Llyr’s eye. Not wishing to disturb it, he bent down to inspect it finding it decorated with a bird with outstretched wings.

Ahead of them, on the horizon, was yet another hill.

SLATE

Rolling grassy hills, with sheer faces pockmarked by excavation, ebbed into dappled grey. Between them lay a round slate building, made deceptively small by the shadows of the hills. It consisted of a near perfect circle, with high slate walls, uniform in height and face and a roof which undulated and rose. A pool of water sat in a large central dip. Dozens of thin plumes of smoke rose out of little chimneys dotted over the surface of the roof. The smoke palled and formed a cloud above the building. The land bent to the will of the circle, settled naturally between the hills, allowing grey to bleed ever upward. It struck Blodwyn and Llyr as an odd arrangement, but despite its layout, they took it to be another Stac. There was a uniformity to the place but at the same time, irregularity. No animals walked the top walls and there were no turrets or towers. Though the roof wasn't remotely even, it was all much the same colour and the small chimneys were of the same design. The roof between them masked any boundaries and the pair could only wonder at how this was reflected inside the structure. Llyr's clothes were near soaked through from the persistent drizzle and began to shiver.

The land funnelled down. The descent was gradual, but the hills drew closer together as if they were going to embrace. Blodwyn felt the earth closing in around her and considered trying to escape this feature, but she remembered the view from the top and it opened out again once they reached the valley floor. The ground beneath Llyr's feet gradually shifted to well-trodden earth. The thin strip twisted between the steep lumps either side of them as it led down. They didn't have to go in, they said to each other, but they were going to have to get close.

As they neared the building, clusters of activity outside the walls fell into view. A group of people headed towards the excavated holes in the hillside around them and other

people dotted the landscape, most in small groups but some were in pairs. A large group dragged a wooden cart between them up a winding path. They didn't pay any attention to Llyr and Blodwyn.

The path coiled around the hillside and was briefly interrupted by a brook. Llyr bent down and shoved his face into the current. Remembering the need, Blodwyn understood what he was doing, although it struck her as odd that he drank while it rained. Llyr turned to face her.

'What?' he laughed.

'Nothing, just,' she smirked, 'why don't you just walk around with your mouth open?'

'Bore da,' a voice called.

Smiling broadly, a stocky man ascended the path towards them, carrying a small cloth bag. He wore a woollen cap and clothes, which were clean though they looked heavy and uncomfortable. They gave him an extra inch or two of width across the shoulders and chest. He nodded acknowledgment at Blodwyn but spoke only to Llyr.

'Straggler are you? The rest have already passed through here days ago. Not all of 'em like.'

'The rest?' Llyr asked.

'Well, I guess there's still time. Saw one yesterday, oh what was her name again? Very tall, frizzy hair. Duw that'll bother me all day that. Not here though, on the other side,' and he quickly shot a thumb over his shoulder and pointed behind.

He took his hat off and scratched his bald head as he twisted pointed toes into the earth.

‘We’re not with her,’ Blodwyn added and the stranger made eye contact with her before addressing Llyr.

‘Usually not many like her with you lot,’ he said to Llyr in a low voice.

Llyr was about to respond, getting as far as opening his mouth before Blodwyn coasted through him and stood between the men.

‘I am with him,’ she said and kept her gaze fixed on the stranger.

He put his hat back on and shook his head. Several people approached on the path behind him. Though they couldn’t be seen yet, their cart and tools made plenty of noise. They were singing but all the rhythm and passion of the cart wheels slowly churning through the earth.

‘Easy now,’ he replied, ‘just curious, we don’t mix too much is all. Not my choice like, that’s just the way it is,’ he gestured towards Blodwyn with an open hand. ‘Please, I meant no harm.’

Blodwyn eased back and drew alongside Llyr.

‘Anyway,’ the man continued, ‘you’ll be on your way I suppose.’

A crew of eight hauled the cart up the path. They were mostly staring at their feet, chanting their song, not seeing or caring who was ahead of them on the path. Llyr thought of Taidy, feeling his way along the walls of Stac. The stranger stepped off the path and waved for Llyr and Blodwyn to follow him. The crew stared, foot over foot, and passed before taking a previously unseen turning off the path and along the hillside. Blodwyn traced their intended journey; they were heading for what looked like a small or new excavation site. One of the men pushing the cart from behind looked back at them and almost lost his footing.

‘Well, I’d best be on my way,’ the stranger smiled, ‘they’re good but not up to much without direction,’ he nodded at them and slowly followed the cart, which had disappeared around the hillside.

Blodwyn and Llyr watched until he was out sight before they descended the hill. As they neared the slate building, Blodwyn saw that the figures outside lacked the colour and warmth of a living being. Though it initially struck her as odd that they weren’t moving at all but she thought no more of it as she neared. Llyr, on the other hand, was fixated on a large opening that resembled a doorway. It had no visible barrier which had to be opened or closed. This, it seemed, was permanently open. They neared the site and Llyr nodded towards the opening.

‘Thoughts?’ he whispered to Blodwyn.

‘I don’t know, I’m not too excited to go rushing into places so soon after leaving one. Especially one which seems... open.’

‘But these people can leave,’ Llyr replied pointing to the several people around them.

Looking back up at the hill, they could see that theirs was just one of many paths worn into the earth. Unbothered by the rain, dozens of people were busily working on the land and both thought it was a wonder that they’d missed them. Most of the workers were bent over, attending to something in the land. The moment Llyr recognised the strain of use in their stooped posture the rain seemed to get heavier. Clouds exhaled their downpour over the site but none stopped to wipe away the water, instead they tightened their hoods if they stopped working at all.

‘I’ll pop in on my own, really quick and if I get into trouble, I’ll call for you,’ Llyr said.

‘Ok, and what exactly am I going to do when that happens?’ Blodwyn replied.

‘You’ll come and find me and show me a way out or something.’

‘You shouldn’t,’ Blodwyn started.

‘I know I shouldn’t. But I have to know what is it like in there.’

Blodwyn sighed and made sure that she passed in front of Llyr so he could see her shaking her head before he entered.

Inside it was dark, despite the many small fires that Llyr knew were smouldering away somewhere. Llyr felt the mortar between the huge slabs of slate. Ignoring the itch to just try the first wooden door he came across; he decided to press on. After all, no door in Stac would open if he wasn’t supposed to go through it. None of the doors glowed as he passed and there weren’t any strange shapes with forgotten meanings but all too well-known intent. It was just door after door built in the slate walls. It took him a while to realise that there were numbers on the doors and that when he got close to them, he could sometimes hear muffled noises. On the other side, conversation flowed as easily as water.

Eventually, the corridor ended in a large double door. A sliver of light traced around its edges and right up through its middle, where the two pieces of wood didn’t quite touch. Llyr looked back at the way he’d come in; he could still see his route out. He crouched and gently pushed the door, which though heavy, swung open with ease. He stepped into the light, which felt more powerful than the natural light outside. Above him was a short set of stairs from which voices, muffled and barely audible, descended. Blodwyn’s smile flashed into his head. It struck him as odd that she still flicked the hair out of her face. He smiled back at the image as it receded from his mind.

He passed back through the tunnel far quicker than he’d entered.

*

Blodwyn cruised up to a man missing both legs below the knee. At first glance, they could have been mistaken for a living man. However, the colour was totally drained from what was his skin. His eyes flashed into place as Blodwyn neared. They looked full of terror, but then settled into a cool indifference. Without moving his head, he looked down below his waist and sighed. He was about to close his eyes and sensing that the moment might pass, Blodwyn leaned in.

‘Bore da,’ Blodwyn offered and wrung her hands in anticipation.

‘Alright,’ the person replied, still motionless. His voice was hollow.

He only acknowledged Blodwyn when she spoke. Otherwise, he stared straight ahead. Blodwyn saw his eyes glazing over like a puddle freezing and she acted before he was lost. She didn’t know if it was going to work. Decay was different for everyone.

‘Is there a lot of you here?’ Blodwyn asked.

‘Depends, what’s a lot?’ The man replied. The ice rolled away from his eyes and he looked keen but in the silent waiting the freeze crept back in.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Stupid question then wasn’t it.’ He made the smallest smirk Blodwyn had ever seen.

‘Ok,’ Blodwyn said and she backed off.

‘You can’t go in you know, not unless you know someone,’ his voice sounded like an echo in reverse – a listless wide sound barrelled toward a focal point.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, you can only go in if you know someone,’ his tone was condescending. That was unmistakable to Blodwyn. In both of her lives, she’d heard that in countless men.

‘So, you were in there?’ Blodwyn asked, wondering why he wasn’t inside.

‘I was,’ he replied. ‘And now I’m not.’

‘And we’re,’ Blodwyn pointed to herself and the man in turn, ‘not allowed in?’

‘That’s right. Not unless someone lets you in. Why are you asking anyway? You’re not from here, are you?’ His eyes darted all around. He looked over Blodwyn’s shoulder at the hillside behind her and at the empty spaces beside her. His face flushed with warmth and for a split second he appeared whole, not just alive but full of life. ‘Are you, just, drifting arou-’ he stopped. ‘Aren’t you afraid?’ He whispered. In an instant, the colour drained out of him and his eyes froze.

Blodwyn backed away. Just around the corner were several other people. Some of them talked to each other, but most were silent and all were seemingly content to stand in place. She was struck by their stillness. As she passed, she found that they were all having what sounded like innocuous conversations. It was difficult to know for sure when only listening to snippets of sound. They could be repeating themselves, stuck in a spiral, circling towards their demise. When there was a natural break in the clusters of people, she decided, to pause for a moment and turn back, passing the way she had just come.

This time, they were all stood in the same places but there was laughter. She hadn’t noticed that before. Can anything be that bad if there is frequent laughter? She slowed to a crawl as she passed a loud and barrel-chested laugh. It was the kind of contagious roar which forces even the most miserable to smile. Between laughs, a man said, ‘he said it was too late, I said love doesn’t keep time.’ Then, in the next break between laughs, ‘he said it was too

late, I said love doesn't keep time.' Blodwyn strayed away from him and through the small forest of people and the repetition echoed behind her.

They were stationary, she noticed, and so were their minds. Stuck fast. Rooted in place and acting out little scenes from their lives. Snippets of conversation, some of it emotionally charged, played out around the structure. There was a couple getting married, who moments later were arguing and insulting each other. Worst of all, there were occasional lucid glimpses from the petrified human forest. Blodwyn thought she'd heard a scream before but now, as she passed by a pair in conversation, she snapped out of their dialogue, looked at their bodies, then at each other and screamed. They pleaded with Blodwyn for help whilst one tried to bound through the wall and back inside. Before they reached the slate, they snapped out of it and the loop started over again. Was this better or worse than the fate of the Wall Man. These people had company, but no one was truly present. She stared down at the floor and thought about whether these people ever had a choice.

Llyr burst out of the opening. Blodwyn was biting her lip, staring wide eyed at him. He'd never seen her do that before. A quick glance over his shoulder confirmed that there was nothing behind him.

'So?' she asked though she didn't look at Llyr, keeping her gaze on the forest of people.

'Nothing, just dark. There's people in there but they're all behind doors and such. Wooden doors though, wooden.'

'Hmm,' Blodwyn replied.

'Listen, I just want to make it clear that we're not following anyone but if that man said that there is a path over that way,' he pointed beyond Blodwyn, 'then maybe we should follow it. Or at least make it up to the top of the next hill.'

‘That seems to be the pattern,’ she smiled at Llyr.

‘Ok well how about from here, we go down? That little bump over there, let’s get up that then just follow it down.’

‘Rather that than,’ she stopped herself from saying any more. Llyr noticed that she stared at the frozen forest.

They hadn’t made it far from the slate building when Llyr saw people bending over gathering things from the floor. Each put their gatherings in a basket carried in the crook of their free arm. Llyr watched with interest. To him it seemed like much of the land that they had already covered – undulating and empty stretches of grass, but he realised, as he stared at the people rising and falling to the floor in turn, that they had a way of seeing that he didn’t. He was blind. Presumably, if they woke up the next day in his twll in Stac, they might feel much the same. Of course, he would know his way around and where to dig his fingernails in to pick moss and how to suckle at certain rocks for moisture if water wasn’t forthcoming, but they wouldn’t. It was communication with your environment. That’s the way he thought of it – communication, a language. The walls spoke and he listened and acted accordingly. Outside, it seemed that grass, bushes and trees spoke and people listened. They plucked and picked and knelt down. They tapped certain offerings before gathering them and they didn’t just shove them straight into their face. Care was taken in placing the items in baskets. After a while the group realised that they were being watched. An older woman turned to face Llyr. She reminded him of Mererid with her wrinkled smile.

He imagined going with these people and their haul back into the slate structure. He didn’t know what the rooms looked like inside and his imagination was found wanting. He pictured Mererid, Taidy, an alive Blodwyn and himself, all sat around a fire. The faces and the fire were all he could see, everything else was in darkness. They were warm, verging on

hot and they passed the basket around, each taking a handful of gleanings before passing it to the next. They gleefully shovelled the mixture into their face and chewed.

The woman had walked right up to Llyr and she held out a large mushroom.

‘They’re out late,’ she said.

‘Where do they go?’ Blodwyn asked.

The woman laughed a clean laugh.

‘They don’t go anywhere don’t you-’ she cut herself off when she saw Llyr’s face.

‘You know, it’s the season, their time of a-year, sometimes they come out a-bit early, out of a-ground like and sometimes they stay around a-bit. Late like. If you see one, make sure to tap it before you pick.’

‘Oh, I see,’ Llyr lied, ‘does that make them easier to pick up or something?’

‘No, see,’ the woman walked through grass until she saw another cluster of mushrooms. They were nestled closely together in a dip beside a rock. The rock was bursting out of the land and it seemed that both it and the mushrooms had been put there by someone else. There was something intentional and purposeful about the way that the mushrooms sat in a shaded groove in the earth. He remembered the trees and how they too seemed inorganic at first. Blodwyn thought that they looked like the misshapen fingers of a creature underground. She’d begun to consider what lay beneath the soil. She’d been so used to passing through different levels that she found the idea that there might be another level of life below them hard to shake.

The woman tapped a mushroom then pinched the stalk just above the ground and pulled it out. With wide eyes Llyr bent down and repeated the action, although he pulled much harder on the mushroom than was necessary. The woman chuckled. It felt cool and

moist in his pinched grip, as though he'd just plucked it from a bucket of cold vegetable stock.

‘See, easy,’ she beamed and she placed another mushroom in Llyr’s palm. ‘They’re much better when cooked a-course, lovely with a few other bits thrown in like.’

Llyr put the smallest mushroom, with a stem the length of his index finger and a fat cap, into his mouth and chewed. He expected it to burst with a sort of liquid but it didn’t. Instead, it shredded between his teeth. If he had his mouth open, he was sure he would have heard it squeak.

With full baskets, the others in the group were heading back towards the structure. The old woman pointed to a long strip which ended abruptly in a pile of unexcavated slate. Two of the group had been there moments before and Llyr could see the fine path they had taken. He followed it as it led back down the hill towards the structure where more plumes of smoke were rising out of the roof.

‘That,’ she said as she pointed, ‘don’t pick the red ones. If they’re nice and dark then they’re fine.’

‘Diolch,’ Llyr said without taking his eyes off the long strip.

‘Da iawn,’ she replied and she set off after the group.

Blodwyn drifted behind Llyr. She was slower than usual and though she faced forwards her thoughts were firmly with the forest of people she had just passed through. She questioned what she had said to Llyr that morning. Had she repeated herself? Had they even travelled or were they still just outside Stac? Had they even left? These questions bounded through her and she tried to focus on the grass under her feet and the patches of grey lining the hillside. As soon as she felt her questions were ridiculous, something pulled her back into

that spiral of doubt. Whether it was thinking that her feet might be a bit fainter, or even just realising that the spiralling thoughts were in themselves a form of repetition. She stopped short of Llyr, who was now busily picking blackberries.

At least being frozen there was better than the Wall Man's lot. Being outside in the light and amongst all that colour. Or was it? If you end up stuck in place, reciting snippets from your life you're little more than a wall carving anyway. Llyr was finding blackberries deep in the bush and he plunged his whole hand into the nest of stalks and tiny spikes. He held out his tunic and formed a pouch which was nearly full of the tiny fruits. He sat down and gorged himself.

'Hey, Blodwyn,' he said through blackberries, 'what are you thinking?'

'Nothing really,' she replied.

She thought about that word, nothing. She pictured a dark black space which ate any sound or image. Was that what she feared? No new sounds heard or uttered. No new sights. Only an endless loop making the same utterances over again into an uncaring darkness. If you're lucky enough to have a flash of awareness, you'd scream. She knew because she'd heard it. It echoed through her whole being. She couldn't expect Llyr to understand.

'I think I just want to move on,' she replied and hoped Llyr wouldn't ask why.

'Excellent,' Llyr said between mouthfuls.

'Got enough there?' Blodwyn chuckled and wondered what they tasted like.

'Suppose I got a little carried away, but you know, there's little bits here and there and everywhere if you know where to look. I think.'

'Trouble is, we don't.'

‘We don’t.’

Llyr thought if he stayed, he might know. He could learn even more. Perhaps he could attach himself to one of the foraging groups. The chimney smoke rose in steady unbroken lines. In the land all around the structure, for at least a mile – or as far as he could see – there were people. Sometimes individuals, but mostly groups of anywhere from two to ten, working the land. Their clothes were more or less the same as his, just as dirty, although maybe they were a bit neater. He saw himself among their number and believed he could easily adjust to life in the weather, picking anything edible and eating it on the hillside.

‘Maybe we should just have a chat with someone, before we leave you know.’

‘What happened to *Go*?’

‘We’ll still *Go*, don’t worry,’ Llyr replied.

The most obvious path to take led past the slate structure, continuing toward the horizon, rather than back the way they’d come. Blodwyn had already set off on a slow descent of the hill. She gave her surroundings another cursory glance, just to see if they’d missed another trail leading away. To her though, all the little paths here and there ended at either excavation sites or bushes. They both thought it strange that they hadn’t seen these before and had only noticed them once they’d watched others walk them. Even so, Llyr wanted to learn the language of the land and felt that he’d already picked up a few words. By spotting the paths, noting their twists and turns and considering their likely purposes, he gave more unconscious consideration to the structure before him.

Llyr jogged up to Blodwyn and opened his mouth to speak before he was interrupted by the bellow of a horn. In a clearing outside the structure, dozens of people assembled. Llyr recognised the old woman who he’d spoken to earlier. Each person emptied their various baskets into corresponding vessels. Their gathered food was segregated by type and the

ordeal was watched over by a tall slim man with a neat pencil thin beard and a prominent widow's peak. One at a time, the gatherers showed him their empty baskets. Each then held their basket upside down and lined the clearing. Llyr stopped and he clutched his tunic, bursting with blackberries.

A flap in the roof of the structure opened and a woman peered out. She nodded at the full coffers and at the man who had overseen the filling.

‘All good Tywysog,’ she said in a low voice and the flap closed.

Despite being in the fresh air, Llyr wiped the sweat from his brow and felt a pang of familiarity, as though he stood back inside the rope chamber after a full shift of hauling. He wanted to ask one of the gatherers, but at the same time he didn't want to hear their answer.

The flap opened again and the same woman poked her face out. She appeared to scan the crowd before she settled on Llyr, pointing a podgy hand at him out of the gap. She seemed to have difficulty breathing and took a moment to fan herself with her free hand.

‘You,’ she screamed, ‘why haven't you contributed?’

‘I don't live here,’ Llyr replied.

‘You mean to say you're one of *them* or from somewhere else?’ she sneered.

Blodwyn moved closer to Llyr and she glared up at the woman.

‘Neither of us are from here,’ she called.

‘Then you have stolen *my* produce,’ the woman shrieked, offended. Llyr had trouble stifling his laughter. ‘Grab him,’ she called.

‘We're just trying to leave,’ Blodwyn added, ‘we don't even want to be here.’

A few of the gatherers took Llyr by the arms. For a moment he considered defending himself and making a run for it, but he was too focussed on not dropping any of his blackberries. He gripped his tunic as tightly as he could and pulled his arms in to his sides. Blodwyn was face to face with one of the aggressors. Although he meant action, she could see that there was a clear reluctance on his face. A voice shot out from the crowd.

‘Brenhines, he really isn’t from here, none of us even know his name.’

There was some mumbled agreeance with the unknown voice though Llyr imagined that it belonged to the old woman who had shown him the blackberries.

‘Even if that were true,’ Brenhines opined, ‘he is not allowed to leave with that much produce. Not a chance.’

Silence fell on the crowd and Llyr felt the moistened bulk of berries against his skin. He thought about whether the berries really belonged to this woman. Had the wild plums been hers too? Or were they possessed only by the land itself? In his experience, crowds and the majority were often wrong and usually powerless to enact change, especially when in service of some unseen superior. However, the slate structure’s superiors were too visible.

Pointing so violently at Llyr that he could almost feel it, she shouted. ‘That is more than any one of you is allocated. And those are our bushes. Ask yourselves, do you want him to have that many or even any? I think you know what the answer is.’

Clutching the berries in his self-made pouch had squashed a number of them and he began to realise just how delicate they were. He turned, stealing a glance back up at the bushes where he’d picked them. The men either side of him adjusted their grip. Llyr let go of the bottom of his tunic and his pouch unfolded its contents onto the grassy floor. He stomped all over the berries, feeling juice in between his toes. The men held him, but his feet were free enough to thoroughly destroy his gatherings.

The little flap in the roof slammed shut.

Blodwyn noticed that a few of the faces in the crowd were smiling and some stifled laughter. She whispered this to Llyr and he had to laugh. The grip on his arm loosened and he watched the men back away from him. None made any attempt to tell him that it was safe to leave but Llyr wanted to enjoy his victory. It was Blodwyn who moved first and Llyr followed.

Around to the rear of the circular structure they passed fenced off areas of land. Llyr wished he knew what was sprouting in the furrowed lines of earth or why these areas had to be cordoned off. Two people stood up to wipe sweat from their brow and as they did so, they glared at Blodwyn and Llyr. Llyr waved but neither reciprocated, bending over again and continued their task in the soil. Something about the fence didn't feel right to Llyr, but Blodwyn paid no attention to it. To her, it was merely another facet of this place that she wanted to leave behind. But Llyr thought it odd to section off areas of earth like this. He wanted to know its purpose whilst also feeling like he wouldn't like the answer.

ASCENT

The berry residue underneath Llyr's sole felt like it was an inch thick. He dragged his foot in an attempt to rub it off. The valley cut a narrow path between the hills and as it climbed the peaks grew into mountains, summits faded behind clouds and mist. Grass and moss gave way to rock. Enormous iceberg-like boulders dotted the landscape with no way of knowing how much of them lay beneath the earth. Somewhere, a boundary between green and grey had been crossed.

Blodwyn thought of it as a forest of stone; she imagined the smaller ones rocking in a breeze, perhaps blowing all the way over and tipping onto their side, revealing a new face to the sun. Decades piled up, with pebbles taking root and growing into rocks. She wondered how long that particular pattern had sat along the mountains. As she closed her eyes for a beat, Llyr observed her, before they opened and repeated the process over again as she tried to commit the formation of the stones to memory. They weren't moving. Or at least they hadn't while she watched.

'How long do you think they've been there?' she asked Llyr, not really expecting an answer.

'No idea, I was just thinking that it looks like they are popping up above ground but then I thought maybe the ground is trying to rise above them. I couldn't decide on which way around that would be but look,' he pointed, 'they go all the way up or as far as I can see anyway.'

A gap in the cloud revealed the stony face of the summit. In another breath of wind, it was concealed. Llyr felt teased by the mountain, goaded by the flash of its true height. He swallowed.

‘I like to imagine that they have some movement and that they aren’t stuck in place,’ Blodwyn said, closing her eyes and only opening them to confirm they hadn’t moved.

Llyr had to step around and scramble over some of the larger boulders, but Blodwyn enjoyed passing through the stones. She was so used to meeting Runic resistance in Stac that she still felt tiny wings of terror beating inside her chest whenever she approached a huge rock. Inside though, the stones weren’t as interesting as the trees. There was no pulse or warmth to them. They were silent. She stepped into a huge rock protruding from the mountainside and crouched down. No matter how long she waited, the stone remained stoic in the face of her investigation.

Once they’d crossed a large potato-shaped boulder they heard a gentle trickle, which Llyr assumed was a mighty river in the distance. He stopped every ten paces or so to check that he hadn’t gone off course. It didn’t make sense to him. Every time he looked around all he could see was stone. Rock upon rock upon rock. Pausing once again, he saw the arrangement of stones differently.

How hadn’t he noticed them before? Snaking their way down the hillsides were a dozen or more small streams, which broke into tiny waterfalls. He didn’t know what to make of the bursts of foam and spray that poked out from between rocks. To Blodwyn, it seemed that the mountain was crying. She couldn’t remember the physical sensation of her eyes filling up with tears and the roll down her cheeks but she somehow knew that was what this land felt.

Llyr was desperate for some kind of communion with the mountain. He advanced further up the path, focussing on individual waterfalls, one stream at a time. All around the trickles was a silence that rose and hid somewhere up in the fog with the summit. He wanted to roll stones away and reveal a large river, something that he could follow and feel. His

yearning for a connection could be satisfied by the meeting of his feet with water. Plunge in. Rivers, he reasoned, were the veins of the landscape and he could tap into that life force and restore his own. Instead, he felt forced to watch and do nothing. Something whispered to him in a tongue he didn't understand and the compulsion to scream, 'I hear you,' was overwhelming.

They only paused to see where they had come from and before long the slate circle was hidden behind steep stony sides. Even if they could push those inclines away, a thickening mist contained the pair in their own bubble. Some streams edged closer to their path, but both had given up trying to seek them out, choosing only to focus on a waterfall's beauty whenever it appeared.

'I have to stop, just for a minute or two,' Llyr wheezed.

His feet, ankles and calves ached. Life in Stac seemed so stationary in comparison, where all physical effort was contained within the same spot. Any muscles for facilitating an escape were woefully underdeveloped. Llyr sat on a small patch of wet grass and rubbed his legs. When Blodwyn effortlessly floated past him, shame strapped itself to his shoulders, anchoring him to the earth. Blodwyn paused a short way ahead on the path and cast a concerned look at Llyr. He'd never been jealous of her but in that moment, he considered ending his first life. These invasive thoughts sometimes popped into his head. Usually when faced with a physical obstacle, in an instant he wished decades away for a split-second solution. He saw himself repeatedly smashing his head into a nearby rock. Or he could submerge his face into a mountain pool and breathe in. He'd stand up again and glide away with her.

Similar thoughts stalked him in Stac. All he wanted was to potentially find a way out further down. There might have been a hole in the lower levels where the living daren't

venture. In truth, what stopped him? Fear? Nearly everyone he'd met had a healthy fear of the pain of the process. Dying was never pain free. Either that or it was so sudden that the shock wouldn't hit you until your body had long gone. You could be tortured by your own first death. He'd seen it happen before. He thought of the boy he'd failed to rescue in Capel. How can a mother comfort their child when they can't even hold them?

Llyr was ready to admit that he was afraid. Inhaling deeply, he wondered if he could never taste the air again, whether he would remember the crisp chill of the mountain, or the moist heat of the Rope Chamber. The thoughts allowed him to conclude that it was worth having feet that felt like rotten vegetables. He rubbed his swollen feet. Fear never worked for him, he thought, but anger, that felt right. It was familiar and settled in his being like knots in wood, the anger gnarled and twisted into itself forming deeper resentments.

'Are you ok?' Blodwyn asked, knowing that it was a bit of a silly question.

'Yes, I'm fine, I think I just need a few minutes.'

'Mind if I look around?'

'No, of course not.'

Blodwyn headed towards a small Rowan tree. It was first significant living thing they'd seen on the mountain. The trunk was thinner than her arm, but its greenery shone like a blazing bonfire on the mountainside. She approached it and it didn't greet her with anything other than the usual rustle of leaves. Moving beyond the tree, she waved at Llyr from a little further up the path. She was just on the edge of their bubble and the outline of her body was fuzzy against the fog. Her waving hand looked more like a club but Llyr could see, once he'd got up and approached, that the crude limb pointed downwards to a rock.

When he got there Blodwyn smiled and nodded at a pool of water. The shallow pool was between two waterfalls, filled by one and emptying into the next. Llyr snatched off his shoes, not bothering to roll up his trouser legs before plunging his feet into the pool. The water was icy cold. It was far colder than anything he'd felt against his skin before, making it hard to believe that it wasn't frozen. Soon, he found that if he didn't move his feet, he could withstand it. Before long, his feet were numb.

'Better?' Blodwyn asked.

He nodded. The pool wasn't all that deep, the water barely made it above his ankles. Going by mere sensation, he closed his eyes and swore that there was nothing below his shins. The sound of his footbath simultaneously filling and draining soothed him up from his feet and into his heart.

'Much better,' Llyr sighed.

'I'm jealous,' Blodwyn said with a small voice.

Blodwyn wasn't smiling, but she didn't look upset. She brushed the hair out of her eyes and tucked it over her ear, only for most of it to fall back out again. Llyr wanted to say, 'don't be, you wouldn't want your feet to hurt like this.' But he thought that if it was him, he'd welcome a little bit of pain because at least then you're feeling something. He wiggled his toes. The numbness wasn't absolute.

'I'm sorry,' was the only thing Llyr could manage as a response.

There was so much Blodwyn wanted to say. That it wasn't his fault. That she thought she remembered how water felt against her skin, but she wasn't entirely sure. She wanted to ask him whether it was as cold as she thought or how his feet felt on the ascent. How long had he wanted to stop and what did he think will make them better? Maybe to dry them off,

he could try propping them up on a rock so that they weren't on the ground at all. All this buzzed around in her head like a bee trapped in a skull.

'It's alright,' she said.

Go as they termed it, was an idea Blodwyn liked but she was beginning to think that maybe they could stop, just for a day. Given the different environments they'd been through and how alive they had been with weather and water; it struck her that anything could change if they stood in one place. Of course, she was terrified of a permanent stop, being trapped. She also didn't want to do what the Whisps did; race everywhere until they banged their head against the walls, ricocheting along the journey they'd just made. There had to be a happy medium and *Go* was just that – a drift. Despite being new to it, she already felt like she was quite good at it, floating along like a leaf on a river, although she knew it would end at some point. She imagined the two of them marching up to a giant wall and climbing it, only to find that there was nothing on the other side. Nothing was difficult to imagine, Blodwyn pictured a blackness so complete that it swallowed every idea and suggestion put to it, her smiling face and Llyr's laughter fell into it and out of existence. That didn't seem right though, it wasn't in accordance with what she'd seen and felt. She could only interpret it as a feeling. Everything she had seen outside Stac was alive and if not connected, then associated in some way. The rocks rooted to the mountainside, the peak sprouting out of the valley floor with its countless blades of grass, each an individual life on a vast expanse of living earth.

She felt the contrast of her own being as she drifted. She wasn't unwelcome, she hoped, but she also knew, better than any tree she'd passed through, or bird she'd heard or flower she'd seen, that it ends. So too must the landscape end in some way, she thought. She wondered just how *Go* would confront that when Llyr interrupted.

‘How do you feel about moving on? Only I think I’d like to find somewhere to sleep, not sure where though,’ he said before he started shoving handfuls of icy cold water into his mouth. He felt like his teeth might shatter from the cold. No matter how many handfuls he scooped in, they didn’t acclimatise to the temperature.

‘We can move on, this way must start descending again eventually,’ Blodwyn replied.

Their bubble seemed to have shrunk around them. Rocky outcrops that she recalled on the mountainside were no longer visible. The peaks were still up there somewhere, but neither had any idea just how high.

Llyr dragged his shoes back on. They felt less coarse than they used to, but he knew that he was ill-equipped. He could see that soon, the rough dirt path gave way to sharp stones. It occurred to Blodwyn that they could have wandered into a dead end. That hadn’t happened outside yet, but it there were plenty of dead ends in Stac. Corridors wound around and into themselves, eventually ending in a dingy twll claimed by the placement of rags. The idea that there could be an end outside gripped her. What would it look like? Did the mist thicken until it formed into stone, blocking you from going any further? They’d have to turn back and try to find an alternative route around the slate ring. But then, if there was one dead end then there’d have to be another and another – just like Stac.

‘Do you think it just ends, or...?’ Blodwyn asked as she tried to see through the fog.

‘I’m hoping that the path continues, we should carry on for a bit. It’s only my feet holding us back,’ Llyr smiled.

No matter how much he concentrated, every few paces what lay underfoot pinched and dug into Llyr’s feet. When passing over the larger boulders, he often slipped, having to take a moment to steady his breathing and find his footing again. Blodwyn kept behind. She watched as Llyr tapped a boulder with his hands before he attempted to scale it. More than

once, she waited for the tap and then cheered him on but the tenth time he lost his footing and had to start over again, she stopped. She wanted to be able to carry him, even if only just a few inches above the tallest rocks. Sympathy gave way to fear as Llyr fell off the side of a sharp pointed rock.

Llyr was sandwiched between two pincer-like stones and his folded parcel fell out of his waistband, sliding into a fissure beneath him. He tried to grab the package as it slithered away from him. He stretched, sliding deeper into the pinch.

‘No, no, no,’ he muttered.

‘That looked painful,’ Blodwyn added. She tried not to loom over him and settled into one of the nearby boulders.

Llyr got up onto his knees and thrust his hand into the fissure. He teased it upwards with his fingertips. Without checking if Blodwyn was watching, he dusted it off and opened it, nodding at the feather, still safe in the centre. He took it out and tickled the back of his hand, looking up when he felt Blodwyn’s eyes upon him.

‘Hang on,’ he said, ‘what’s that?’

He pointed at an area of mist on the edge of their bubble. Between gusts of wind, the mist thickened and thinned again, revealing a collection of rocks piled together, more than twice the height of Llyr. A path led from one end of it further into the mist.

Approaching the path, Llyr brushed himself off. With his other hand he carefully replaced the wrapped feather back into his waistband, only breaking eye contact with the pile to ensure the safety of the package. There were a few Rowan saplings dotted around the rock pile as the boulder field gave way to patches of hardened earth.

A small hole in the side of the structure invited Llyr to kneel down and look inside. He looked to Blodwyn for support, and found her stood, with arms folded, scowling. She thought that they shouldn't be so willing to crawl inside stone structures after how hard it was to escape one, but she acknowledged that her feelings were decades deeper than Llyr's. He thought he was being cautious; he wasn't running in and had made sure that the structure had an exit. As far as he could tell, it didn't have a door that could fall into place at a moment's notice. It was dark inside. Even when most of his head was through the entrance, he still couldn't see much. The space inside sank down further than he thought it would from its outside appearance. There was a rectangular shape which was cut right into the mountainside. Otherwise, little else was visible apart from what looked like a pile of debris in the centre.

'There's no one in there,' Llyr called out before turning to face Blodwyn, 'see for yourself, it seems safe.'

Blodwyn kept her arms folded as she bent down to look inside; she couldn't see anything either. The darkness seemed to breathe, patient and watchful. After a fraught but fruitless search for Runes, she thought the unease would settle, but she couldn't let go. If she still had lungs, they would be straining for air; if she still had a heart, it would be hammering hard between them. Instead, there was only that hollow awareness, the phantom of panic where a pulse should be

'I don't know,' she whispered to Llyr and backed out of the entrance.

'Ok,' Llyr soothed and held up his hands, 'we don't have to go in, but how about I take a look? Would you mind that?'

'Gwyn used to say that there was free food in the mouse traps, that's why they to run into them.'

'Gwyn? Oh, Taidy? He used to catch mice?' Llyr asked, surprised.

‘He did, before he decided it was too cruel. Not much meat on them anyway.’

Llyr smiled, got on his hands and knees and crawled inside.

With his back to the entrance, he sat down and waited a few moments for his eyes to adjust. The rectangular shape to his left was a bed, which looked more comfortable than his bed back in Stac. The sheets were thicker and the pillow was as plump as three Stac pillows. The pile of debris in the centre turned out to be wood, arranged in a crude pyramid on a bed of rocks. In the centre of the wood was some tight balls of straw.

‘Seems fine in here,’ Llyr called over his shoulder.

‘It would,’ Blodwyn replied, before floating through the walls.

‘Makes sense,’ Llyr said when Blodwyn appeared alongside him.

‘Well, I feel better knowing I can get out. You’ve only got the one exit though,’ she nodded at the hole behind him.

‘What do you think this place is?’ Llyr asked and wasn’t really expecting an answer.

‘Squeak squeak,’ Blodwyn said and stared at Llyr as she waited for a response.

Llyr ignored Blodwyn as he was drawn to two small stones next to the pile of wood. They had a glint to them and one of their edges was sharpened. Although he couldn’t think where, Llyr thought he’d seen stones like this before. They felt light and delicate in his hands and their shine made them appear sharper than they actually were. He ran a calloused finger across their length and they didn’t leave a mark.

‘Drag them across each other,’ Blodwyn said.

Llyr shot her a puzzled look then he struck them together in his lap. Sparks shot out and settled on his legs. He jumped. If Blodwyn didn’t know him better, she’d have assumed

that he was angry, but she recognised his expression as a familiar determined frown he often wore. He dragged the stones across each other again sending sparks between his legs. His eyes lit up.

‘How did you-’ Llyr started.

‘I’ve forgotten more than you know,’ Blodwyn smirked.

Llyr didn’t usually feel the years between he and Blodwyn, but he did then. It’s easy to forget, he supposed, especially when she looked about the same age as him if not younger. Just as he thought this, once again noting the funny way she flicked her hair out of her face and over her ear, a few transparent spots circled over her body, allowing him to see right through her to the stone wall behind her. Was she getting harder to see? he pondered.

Llyr found that when he was a bit less enthusiastic about creating a spark, they came a little easier. Blodwyn couldn’t help but smile at the child-like wonder he wore on his open-mouthed face at the sparks descending onto the wood and the subsequent embers flickering into life. The centre of the pile glowed red and Llyr kept pouring sparks down. She wanted to reach out and take his arm and pull it back but knew that this would break his concentration. The flames licked their way up the wood, before taking a firm hold. The resulting glow filled the stone structure.

It wasn’t a hovel. The bed sheets were thicker than he had previously thought and there was a small shelf holding bowls and utensils. A short metal frame stood in the corner, with a pot hanging from it. Another, smaller bed was cut into the floor below the larger one. Estimating, Llyr thought that around eight people could comfortably sleep in the structure, perhaps more if they were willing to be uncomfortable.

The wood smoke billowed through Blodwyn and out a small hole in the roof. They both wondered whether that would alert someone to their presence, but as his body warmed,

Llyr found himself caring less. Blodwyn was more cautious and she kept shooting glances over her shoulder at the entrance. Having taken his clothes off and lain close to the fire, Llyr didn't even notice when it started raining. He stretched out his feet, found the perfect point between warm and burned, and wiggled his toes.

‘Llyr,’ Blodwyn started.

Just the way his name sounded in her mouth made Llyr shift in his seat. He knew he wouldn't like what was going to come next. It was similar to the tone the Capel leader might take with him after he had been scratching the floor. He never knew how long they had been watching or what they'd seen. He crossed his arms over his stomach.

‘Yes,’ he replied, although he couldn't meet Blodwyn's eyes.

‘What's the thing you've got folded up in that... thing?’ Blodwyn asked and when Llyr looked at her she pointed to his waist.

‘Well,’ Llyr started then he inhaled.

‘Come on, it's alright,’ Blodwyn placed a hand through his shoulder. Although it felt like a cold spike sank into his torso, once it had taken hold, he was glad it was there.

‘It's a feather, just a bird's feather,’ Llyr said, unfolding the package and took it out. First, he habitually tickled his left palm. Then he held it up in front of Blodwyn's face and slowly twisted it around in a pinched grip. Blodwyn stared wide eyed. Llyr tickled the back of his hand and goosebumps rose up in the feather's wake. She lay next to him on the floor.

‘How long have you had it? And might I ask, why?’ Blodwyn spoke quietly as she surveyed the feather. It didn't appear all that special to her. Yes, it was out of the ordinary, and it was pretty, but it seemed to have no apparent use.

‘I found it years ago. I’ve no idea how it got through the walls. Back then I had access to a much better water source – a great big crack in the wall. One morning, it was just lying there, some miracle, I thought, must have brought it through the opening.’ Llyr wasn’t looking at Blodwyn as he only addressed the feather. He felt embarrassed discussing this, but he also knew that, even if she didn’t understand, Blodwyn wasn’t going to mock him. ‘I don’t know why, but this beautiful thing came from outside somewhere and well, you know Stac,’ Llyr cut himself off.

‘It made you feel?’ Blodwyn offered.

‘Like there was something worthwhile. Outside. Like, confirmation, there was, *is* an outside. A somewhere that wasn’t Stac.’

‘And now we’re out here?’ Blodwyn continued.

‘I’ve had it for so long and I always wanted to know where it came from you know?’ Llyr thumbed the package the feather lived in. It was part of an old tunic of his. He remembered just how it felt when it was new, crafted by Mererid, but now all that remained was a torn corner.

‘I know, I think I understand,’ Blodwyn smiled, removing her hand from his shoulder. She was glad to see him smiling and he took the usual amount of care in putting the feather away in its package.

GATHERING

Llyr stepped outside the shelter. The sun cut through the mist, leaving it as little more than a memory. Llyr's breath felt lost in the thin air, causing him to instinctively miss the closeness of Stac. As soon as that feeling marshalled itself into a tangible thought, he batted it away and tried to smile at the vastness behind each exhalation. He craned his neck and sketched in the silhouette of the mountain. He imagined it rising to a point, with great tooth-like crags on one side and a smooth rise on the other. He wondered if that was anywhere near the truth and part of him wanted to continue upward. The path they attempted to follow didn't stop, though it narrowed. It zigzagged through the stones with a small branch which led to the shelter. Llyr couldn't believe they made the now obvious mistake of tackling the boulders head on instead of following the path. Standing on the summit lost some of its appeal. The path continued towards a ridge, which to Llyr looked like the edge of the world, where Blodwyn stood.

She'd traced the journey of the path across the landscape below. It led down the steep face in a mostly straight line and back into forest. Although she felt she ought to be used to forests and trees by now, something was different about this one. It wasn't only because of the clearing which unfolded a little way into the trees. The trees looked about the same as they had anywhere else: oak, ash, sycamore, rowan, holly and yew. But, during the previous night something glowed in the clearing. But beyond the clearing and the forest was the horizon which held something even more puzzling. Water. The biggest body of water that she had ever seen, far larger than the lake but much less dark and intimidating. This water was a lighter blue and there was a sense of motion to it. She still wasn't used to how big the wilderness could feel and everything below the mountain appeared to her like it was a picture. She wanted to reach out and touch the water or stroke the area a short way beyond the forest. She held out her hand and peered between her fingers. Lifting it up to the water, she noticed that the shade of blue was slightly different between her index and middle finger

and again between her ring and little finger. It took her a while to pick up on that difference and as soon as she had she lost it again. There were darker and lighter blotches and the motion was more obvious now. Just below her thumb though, was a dirty grey blotch on the vista. The familiarity of it filled her with anger.

Approaching in the early morning light, Llyr guessed that Blodwyn had been stood there, transfixed, since he'd fallen asleep. He knew that she wasn't entirely comfortable inside and considered reassuring her that it was ok in there, suggesting they bed down for another night before continuing.

'Careful,' Blodwyn advised as Llyr approached.

'Why?' he answered, stepping up alongside her.

Dizziness swayed him and he reached around for something to ground himself on. His hands flailed as he fell through Blodwyn and struck a rock. He mumbled an apology and fought to stand, opting to face the shelter, only stealing glances of the view.

'I've seen it all,' Blodwyn started, 'much of the mist cleared during the night. There were so many stars that it wasn't totally dark because there was this faint light all around. It was so beautiful. Just me and the wind over the rocks. After an hour or so I could hear it – a faint whistle. I watched the sun come up and it changed the colour of everything. Like it poured life over anything it touched,' she paused, 'even me.'

Llyr kept trying to glance at the picture before them. His eyes watered and he couldn't focus. He grunted an acknowledgement to Blodwyn, but still he had to draw his forearm across his eyes. He wondered about the embers of the fire and whether he could stoke any life out of them.

Blodwyn continued, 'I swear I almost felt its warmth, probably just because I could see it. The sun. And I could see that there is a big difference in who is around at night and during the day. With the daylight came noises, sounds, all manner of different things were waking up. There's life everywhere, absolutely everywhere. Even up here. But mostly I got used to this view,' Blodwyn wasn't blinking and she wasn't smiling. She stood perfectly still and stared ahead, wide eyed. 'I felt a bit like you when I first saw this but honestly, you get used to it. I think it is just down to where we've been. You know?' She turned away from the horizon to face Llyr who still had his forearm across his face.

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'but I've been out here for a fair few hours,' she chuckled and turned back to the view.

'It's alright, I'll take your word for it, that I'll get used to it I mean,' Llyr replied.

Squinting at the view, he felt like throwing up. The scale was entirely wrong. It looked enormous but like he could touch it at the same time. He tried to focus on the path, tracing it down into the forest. But it was so steep that as he tried to follow it, he felt himself falling forwards. He had to sit down. Once again, he felt that pull to be between solid objects, hemmed in. He couldn't take in the sea and the sky and the blurred line where the two met. It was too much. He turned to face the summit, thudded down onto all fours and crawled backwards down the path.

Blodwyn watched Llyr's clumsy progress. He'd given up with the slow process of crawling and was staggering down. He had to try and stop every now and then when his legs seemed to want to run away from the rest of his body. Moments after regaining control, he would lose it again, panicking as he sped down. Even watching his feet as they dug into scree didn't help steady his descent.

She recognised the need to stare at the slice of earth in front of your feet. Although the right foot was barely visible, she looked at her own feet. Three of the toes had disappeared and she knew that the rest of the foot would soon follow. She wondered when that had happened. If she followed the worrisome, racing thoughts the disappearance would spread up her leg and possibly even jump over to the other foot. She adjusted her dress and lowered the hem over her feet, resolving to take in the view once more. More mist had dissipated. She couldn't get used to the fact that you can stand and watch a scene for hours but if you take your eyes off it for one second, there'll be a noticeable difference. She'd felt the same way when watching the sun come up. Even though she'd stood more or less in the same spot for the duration of the night, the switch from darkness to light happened in a blink. Or at least, it took the second glance to confirm the change and see things again in different terms. Before she set off, she lifted the hem. The foot hadn't returned.

It took her longer than expected to catch up with Llyr, though she was conscious about rushing. When the path evened out a little, Llyr maintained a steady gait. He paused a moment to take in the view. The water had gone, lost behind the trees and for that he was thankful. Life was easier to handle in manageable chunks and the view was too much to digest in one go. He remained focussed on the trees and had even chosen an entry point into the forest. The gap between two large oak trees seemed to be there by design, although there was no sign of anything being felled or cleared between the two ancient giants, though there was a well-trodden path. Llyr imagined this was the forest's way of welcoming them and he was pleased at finding the path, reading its shape like letters in the land.

His ankles and feet hurt and he wished there for another mountain pool. Inside the forest, there was a now familiar moistness to the air and the sound of birds and small creatures scurrying just out of sight. Llyr rarely seemed to catch them in time or if he stole a

glimpse they'd soon be gone, up a tree or jumping along into another branch. The hope and anticipation that he might see something, anything, urged him through the forest.

Blodwyn felt an overwhelming urge to make it to the water. Countless memories of other people missing limbs and chunks of their personhood chased her down the mountain. Of course, she'd never knowingly measured the time between each inexorable step towards the end. Had anyone? Most are too wrapped up in their own life to truly observe and note changes in other people as they happen. It was always after the fact, if at all, and nobody ever marked the time and measured the distance between that and the next change. The process seemed entirely individual and personal. Some people she'd known had kept their body intact but had lost their character and personality. She'd always assumed that they could *feel* when something disappeared. What would happen to her? Physically, she felt just the same as she did before she noticed the missing foot. It was the familiar paradox of feeling like you have a physical form without having any agency. So, she felt just the same – nothing.

Llyr stood with his eyes closed. Even behind closed eyelids he felt the brown of the bark and the greenery in the leaves and in small pockets of grass on the otherwise earthen floor. Thinking back to his first foray into the forest, he wished he had the level of understanding and recognition that he had now. He turned back, faced the mountain and opened his eyes. It stood there, like a challenge waiting to be understood. Llyr was lost upon its back but and thought he would never conquer it. It was somewhere to survive rather than thrive. For thriving, he had the forest. He recognised a blackberry bush and began picking. Rather than keeping them in a pouch he just popped them straight into his mouth. From berry to berry there was some variation in the fruits, but they were as he remembered and he ate his fill, treating this as a victory over the mountain. His picking took him further into the forest and Blodwyn briefly lost sight of him.

‘Still just as good?’ Blodwyn asked.

‘Definitely,’ Llyr replied through a full mouth.

The land undulated and rose in a chaotic order like an unmade bed. The absence of an obvious path forced Llyr and Blodwyn to travel in what they thought was a straight line. There was much deliberation in the form of pointing and nodding or shaking of heads. They came across several thin trails which looked like they could have been a viable path, but when they followed one for a little while it either converged with another or petered out. Light dappled down through the trees, giving the impression that the season was changing overhead. Even though the forest floor was cool, there was a sense that just above the trees it was warm. Llyr couldn’t believe the difference in this to the mountain and tried to imagine that level of mist in the forest. If that happened, he figured that he would just head for a tree and hold on until it passed. Behind that decision was a lack of confidence and a hope that it wouldn’t have to be challenged.

Blodwyn’s worries hadn’t been left on the mountain. They’d followed her through the trees and jumped down on her whenever she peeked through the canopy to the sun overhead. The sky was otherwise clear. She found it easier to bat away the concerns, back up into the empty sky. There was no use fighting it or worrying though, she told herself. Then she asked, is there anything you can do about it? No. So stop thinking about it. But that was only a temporary solution. They’d pass another few trees and it might be a sapling with a few branches snapped off which caused her to think, I wonder if I’ll lose my arms? Or not if, but when. Another time, the sound of a pinecone crunching under Llyr’s foot made her feel as though her legs had shivered away into nothingness.

‘I wonder if we’re still going straight, not that it matters,’ Blodwyn said and temporarily quietened the voices in her head.

‘I don’t know, I think we are. I could climb a tree and see what’s what? Or we just keep going? Or,’ Llyr replied. They’d wandered into a darkened dip in the forest floor, a natural crater formed aeons ago.

‘How about we stop a moment? Would that be alright, just have a listen.’

‘Ok,’ Llyr understood why Blodwyn might want to listen.

It seemed inordinately still around them. Much of the scurrying of small animals had been left behind and they couldn’t hear any birds. Even the wind passed over them and didn’t dare disturb the trees. Blodwyn found it uncomfortable. As soon as Llyr sat down and was occupied with a piece of wood she lifted the hem of her skirt. Still missing. Had more gone?

‘Actually, we should keep going, see if we can’t find you some water or something,’ she blurted out.

‘Are you sure? We’ve only just stopped,’ Llyr looked up, confused.

‘Yes,’ Blodwyn said, a little curter than she intended, ‘we should keep going,’ and she forced a smile.

As Llyr stood up, they heard distant voices, laughing between snippets of conversation. Blodwyn held her finger up to her mouth to silence Llyr, who was just about to hold his own finger up and instruct Blodwyn in the same way. They stared at each other as they listened. Llyr looked confused and curious while Blodwyn looked angry. Her brow was furrowed but she was just trying to discern where the voices came from. It was somewhat darker in their little valley than the surrounding forest and the voices floated above somewhere in the light. Llyr wanted to know what they were saying and how many of them were speaking. He thought it was at least two if not three people, whose voices skirted around on the periphery of their hearing until they faded out of earshot.

‘What was that?’ Blodwyn asked. ‘I mean, I know what it was obviously, but you just don’t expect to hear it do you?’

Llyr had his head cocked to one side as though he emptied it of unnecessary sound to allow for something new to enter. He nodded at Blodwyn and pointed upwards out of their little darkened dip.

‘I think they’re going that way,’ he whispered.

As they approached the ridge, Blodwyn considered entering Llyr. Part of her wondered whether this was cowardice. She wasn’t a coward, she told herself and began to wonder where that self-directed accusation came from, she merely didn’t know how people might react to her, and so this was the safest option. Together, they crested the rise and the forest opened out. The trees weren’t quite as close together and more light hit the forest floor. There was more grass here and even Llyr and Blodwyn could tell there was greater diversity in the trees.

Around a hundred feet away, two children, a boy and a girl chasing each other, shot across their path. Their laughter faded in and out, following them through the trees. Llyr and Blodwyn froze. The children chased each other around the trunk of a thick oak. The boy stopped and threw something small and hard at the girl, narrowly missing. Llyr flinched at the impact against the tree. The pair couldn’t quite hear what the children were saying, but they saw that the girl was complaining and the boy was ignoring her. An adult emerged through the trees and picked both of them up and put one on each shoulder. He must have spoken but neither Llyr or Blodwyn could hear anything that he said.

Blodwyn looked over her shoulder. One of the narrow trails through the trees led to this point, but she could see others twisting ahead all through the forest. The mountain was still there, peeking through the canopy and she considered suggesting to Llyr that they back

out and follow the treeline. Llyr thought about suggesting that they climb a tree, or at least he would climb and she could hide inside.

‘Alrigh’ there, didn’ think you’d make it,’ a familiar voice said.

A juniper bush ambled towards them. A sparrow flew over the top of it and the bush coughed. It stopped and craned its neck to watch the sparrow as it flew up high above them. Bryn removed his facemask and smiled.

‘Saw you comin’ down the moun’ain. Duw,’ he chuckled and mimicked Llyr’s clumsy half run, ‘wan’ to be careful goin at that sor’ of speed.’

Llyr turned to Blodwyn and was about to respond when Bryn continued. ‘No, I mean, you was goin’ fair fast like, saw you I did. Though’ I’d mee’ you.’

The pair surveyed Bryn in silence for a moment, both feeling they needed to talk to the other. Llyr wanted to ask how they’d bumped into this person again given the size of the outside world, whilst Blodwyn wanted to know whether they could trust Bryn. Llyr concluded that he could never beat Bryn in a fight as his forearms were like Llyr’s thighs and he was so much taller. At least Blodwyn could escape though, he thought. He was wondering how he would catch up to her when Bryn spoke.

‘How’s the journey been?’ he asked, his smile bouncing between the two.

‘Why?’ Blodwyn asked.

‘Why wha’?’ Bryn replied.

‘Why do you want to know?’ Llyr added.

‘Well, jus’ curious like, that’s what this is for,’ he raised his hands and gestured behind him.

Through the trees in the distance a woman walked through a glade. There were countless voices sharing snippets of conversation on the wind. Not a single sound was threatening and that troubled Blodwyn. She never knew how people would react to her and there was a known safety in apprehension. It troubled Llyr too. His memory of being seized for the crime of picking fruit was too recent. He swallowed, finding he could still taste the blackberries that he'd picked on the edge of the forest.

'The forest?' Llyr asked.

'No, well yes bu' also no, gatherin' you know?'

'No, we don't know,' Blodwyn added.

'Well, I'll show you, come on,' Bryn waved for them to follow him and he turned away.

'Hang on, we're not going anywhere with you,' Llyr said and felt his chest tighten as soon as the words left his mouth.

Bryn laughed. His laugh was bigger than he was and when he was finished, he coughed and cleared his throat. He turned back to face them and looked down at Llyr who had clenched fists and Blodwyn who drifted menacingly forwards. Llyr's fists trembled at his sides and he looked around for a stick or a rock but everything was out of reach.

'You're from one of those horrible stone places aren' you?' Bryn was soft voiced.

'What?' Llyr replied, taking a fraction of a step backwards.

'Though' I could see i' on you when we me' before like. You was, I don' know how to say, but you was frigh'ened. But like different you know? I know I'm no' making sense.'

'What do you mean?' Blodwyn asked.

‘I mean you was like a new-born kid on-a wobbly legs like,’ Bryn looked confused by his own analogy. He took a moment to picture it, then he nodded to himself.

‘Right,’ Llyr and Blodwyn said. Llyr tried to imagine how they might look to someone used to being outdoors. Blodwyn hadn’t noticed Llyr’s legs wobbling before but then she wasn’t exactly looking.

‘You’re free to do wha’ you wan’,’ Bryn started then he held up his hands as if he was being accused of something, ‘of course you are. Bu’ I’m no’ going to harm you and these people won’ harm either. Tha’s no’ wha’ i’s for. I guess the easies’ way is to show you.’

‘Show us what?’ Llyr said and he took another step back and crouched down.

Bryn turned to leave. Blodwyn thought it remarkable that a man of his size made so little noise as he walked. He didn’t breathe as heavily as Llyr and so the only sound was just the gentle rustle of his branches and leaves framed by distant conversation. As they passed, she noted every tree that would be suitable for her to hide in. Llyr unclenched his fists. He might not be able to fight Bryn, but he could run away. He purposefully lagged a little way behind and kept making note of any available escape route. Despite this, the forest had already swallowed them and Llyr felt his lack of communion with the landscape. As soon as he’d begun to feel a little confident, the voices through the trees taunted him with a knowledge he may never acquire.

‘So,’ Bryn started, ‘just so yous not too frigh’ened, there’s a lo’ of people here.’

‘How many is a lot?’ Blodwyn asked, bracing herself for the worst reactions she could think of.

‘I don’t know, never been one for coun’ing really. Some are bigger than this and some are smaller, this one is probably a bi’ on the small side really. I reckon.’

‘This one what?’ Llyr whispered.

The clearing was obscured on the edge by an ancient oak tree. Its trunk was truly enormous. It reminded Llyr of the old foundational stones of Stac; the huge things upon which something truly awful was built. The thick scent of smoke felt heavy in Llyr’s nose. Bryn led the way around the oak and the pair considered running back through the trees before they nodded at each other dutifully followed him around. Blodwyn shadowed Llyr and whispered, ‘first sign of anything, off, and we’re gone, alright?’

‘Where? which way?’ Llyr replied.

‘Just go straight ahead, I’ll follow, I’ll find you,’ Blodwyn replied.

‘I’ll find you too,’ Llyr whispered. He desperately wanted to squeeze her hand to let her know that he’d heard her and listened. Without realising, Blodwyn’s voice had become a comfort to him. In spite of her lack of breath, whenever she broke a silence, it was like a warm current of air washed over him and he wanted to reciprocate. A moment of palm-to-palm contact could do that, a touch can say, ‘it’ll be alright.’ His calloused, dirty hand would pass right through her, he knew that but it didn’t stem the longing for just a second of contact. Anything to reassure her, he thought, even though he longed for a sign of safety.

Despite the fact that it was still daylight, there were six bonfires of various sizes in the clearing, each with people clustered around them. Some sat in groups of four or five and others were much larger, with as many as fifteen or twenty. There were no boundaries between the groups and nothing indicated which fires people should go to or avoid. They watched as one couple got up from the fire closest to them and joined the next fire along. In the opposite direction, a woman did the same. Llyr couldn’t understand why their positions weren’t fixed. They mingled, moved freely and there was endless conversation.

Some ate and drank from wooden bowls whilst others sewed. Children skipped between groups and played with sticks and leaves. Llyr turned to ask Bryn about it, but he was gone, having joined one of the larger groups. He wasn't the only one in green costume. As far as they could see, there was another man, not quite as large, who wore a thick coat which was covered in holly. Most, it seemed, dressed similarly to Llyr, wearing a basic sackcloth but they wore more layers, had less skin exposed and seemed cleaner. One group, assembled around the fire on the opposite side of the clearing, were all dressed the same as each other. They wore baggy clothes which were a dirty grey. Llyr thought that they were robes until one stood up and he saw that it was like a body-suit with a large cloth belt around the waist and they all wore necklaces with a little pendant. The pendant seemed familiar somehow but Llyr put that to the back of his mind once he saw the feathers. They all had feathers sewn in across the back of the shoulders, clusters on each side. When one of the men got up, Llyr's eyes followed him, transfixed on the feathers, as he joined another group. Most of the groups had at least one of these grey-clad people in it. Although he couldn't hear what they were saying, he saw that they were the most animated speakers, using plenty of raised eyebrows, open-mouthed grins and exaggerated hand gestures. Their feathers fluttered with their movement of their bodies.

Blodwyn looked for people like her and to her surprise there were a few. Granted, not many, but the few that were there were hard to distinguish from the living. They sat right alongside each other but they didn't eat, drink or sew. They did something far more important. They laughed. One that she was particularly taken with appeared to hold the full attention of her group. Although she couldn't hear what was being said, all that mattered to her was the life behind the speaker's eyes, despite missing her left arm and some of her torso. Naturally, Blodwyn wanted to approach her, but for the first time in two lifetimes she felt intimidated.

Soon enough a stranger approached them with a wooden bowl containing some fruit and a piece of what looked like bread. Llyr had only eaten bread a few times and each time it was so hard that it had be dropped into a bowl of stew and soaked until it became like a great clod of moss.

‘Hello,’ the stranger said. She had long ginger hair tied up in a ponytail.

‘Hello,’ Llyr returned.

‘So, how is your journey going?’ she asked and she offered the bowl to Llyr and nodded a greeting at Blodwyn. ‘Ffion,’ she added.

Llyr thought it would be rude to give in to the overwhelming impulse he had to shovel the contents of the bowl into his mouth. He poked the bread. The crust was hard but the crumb was soft and easily gave way to his finger. He longed to shred it between his teeth.

‘It’s going ok,’ Llyr replied and he looked at Blodwyn who nodded first at him and then at the stranger. ‘How is yours?’ he added.

‘Going well really, there’s five of us and we scaled a mountain a month or so back, just like this one,’ she pointed through the trees ‘but much taller, it is the tallest one we’ve done,’ she smiled at Blodwyn. ‘The view from up there was staggering. They say a giant is buried there. A few others have been there too; it has got to be at least half as tall as this one but again if you see what I mean.’

‘I do,’ Blodwyn replied.

‘So, what have you seen?’ Ffion asked, motioning for Llyr to eat.

This was all too easy for Blodwyn and she didn’t trust it. She wondered if the trees around the clearing were about to glow with some power or knowledge forbidden to them, then everyone like her would be rounded up and trapped. If that happened, she hoped that

Llyr would do something for her. She had a feeling that he would. She didn't know where to begin with her reply. What had she seen? She wanted to say, everything, but she knew that as soon as the word left her mouth it would be challenged.

'All sorts,' Blodwyn replied and she didn't quite know where she was going next but she struggled on. 'The view from this mountain here, that was beautiful,' she said, hoping that would be enough.

Through a mouthful of food, Llyr mumbled some agreeance before he swallowed and blurted out, 'so, what is it?'

'What is what?' Ffion asked. Her politeness still troubled the pair.

'What is this?' Blodwyn added, pointing to the happy rabble behind Ffion.

'Oh, First time? Well, it is just a place for sharing really,' Ffion shrugged her shoulders.

'Sharing what?' Blodwyn and Llyr asked in perfect synchronicity.

'Anything,' Ffion replied, looking confused. Blodwyn assumed she must be struggling to articulate it.

'Anything?' Llyr asked.

'Anything and everything. Advice, stories, food, clothes. It's just good to get together you know?' Ffion briefly paused before adding, 'if you don't know, you'll see.' She smiled.

Having finished his bowl of food and with warmth spreading through his torso, Llyr cleared his throat, 'thank you,' he started, 'but I'm not sure I get it.'

'It happens every once in a while, it isn't always in the same place of course. Not everyone goes. Obviously,' she laughed as though they would know why it was funny.

‘Whenever someone feels like setting up for a while, even you could do it, they stop and share. Eventually others join and then more and then everyone goes on their way. There’s probably at least two or three happening right now.’

At that moment, another person walked around from the back of the oak tree.

‘Excuse me,’ Ffion said and they approached him and she asked, ‘how was your journey.’ The newcomer responded and within seconds they were lost in conversation.

They felt like every eye was upon them but looking at all of the faces did something to dispel that myth. Each person was preoccupied with their conversation or food or both. Llyr had never seen so many teeth in one place in his life, it must be the laughter, he thought. Some people, including the Holly bush, acknowledged Llyr and Blodwyn with a happy wave. Bryn sat next to him and the two plant men raised their wooden cup as Llyr and Blodwyn passed. The pair chose the smallest fire on the other side of the clearing and they sat down.

Llyr and Blodwyn faced each other but each peered around, observing the other people. They spoke about the groups around them until the sunlight faded. Eventually letting his guard down, Llyr stretched and lay down. He still faced Blodwyn and knew that she could see over his shoulder and would alert him if anything was coming. He would of course do the same for her but he felt that they were safe. He took off his shoes and enjoyed, for the first time, the feeling of grass between his toes. Blodwyn passed her hand through Llyr’s foot and he shot up. The icicle-like pain lingered and he moved his foot closer to the fire. Blodwyn nodded towards Bryn as he walked towards them.

‘Sorry,’ he started, groaning as he sat down. Most of his height was in his torso because even on the floor he was much taller than either of them and wider than both of them combined. ‘I haven’t seen old Dylan for years, we travelled together for a while, but then I

guess a fair few of us have,' he pointed and waved at one of the groups. A hand waved back but the face it belonged to was lost among the others and the flames.

'Had anything to ea'?' Bryn asked.

'Why is everyone being so nice to us?' Blodwyn said curtly. She was taken aback by how harsh she sounded and considered apologising.

'Not sure we are really, just the way we are,' he paused, but he could see from the look on their faces that it wasn't a satisfactory answer. 'I took yous for Los' when I me' you. I knew you were new like bu' still. I don' think there are many of your type, you know, people from those stone prisons, wandering abou'. But we,' he gestured to everyone around him, 'are the Los'.'

'You're the Lost?' Llyr asked.

'In a way, yes,' Bryn replied with all the confidence of someone who knew a question was coming that he didn't know how to answer.

'Can you explain?' Blodwyn asked.

'Ohhhhh,' Bryn groaned and shifted about on the floor, 'don' know really. We walk, we wander, we roam. Sometimes we stop, like right now, but we get right back to walking. Tha's i' really.'

'So really, you're walkers? It is just walking,' Blodwyn replied sceptically.

'No there's more than tha', I'm probably no' explaining i' very well,' Bryn pulled some grass out of the ground in frustration and rubbed the blades between his fingers. He sniffed and closed his eyes.

'I get it, you walk and you just see things?' Llyr offered

‘I guess so, I like seeing things, i’s more than tha’ though,’ Bryn smiled. ‘We are guided by the land you see. Like walkin’ through a dream. Bu’ the landscape, the earth, tha’s wha’ you follow, it leads the way.’

The fire crackled away between them. Through the flames, faces emerged, and any time eye contact was made, they smiled. Despite feeling like he couldn’t trust it, Llyr was thankful for the warmth and the food. He found that some bread crumbs had become lodged in his teeth and he picked at them with his finger and savoured the sodden clods. Blodwyn watched an adjacent fire, where two others like her got up and danced with each other. Each person in that group began to clap in rhythm to the dancers who continued on then bowed deeply in the flames, their faces glowing through the embers.

‘What about those people?’ Llyr asked Bryn and pointed to the grey-clad group.

‘Oh, they’re alrigh’. Only me’ ‘em twice before. Las’ time was jus’ ou’ and abou’ you know, like how I me’ you and we shared the path for a while. Other time was another gatherin’. They talk a lo’, a lo’, tha’s the only issue. I think some people don’ want ‘em talkin’ to ‘em.’

‘Oh, I see,’ Llyr said having more questions now than he had before. ‘They aren’t Lost then?’ he asked.

‘No. Anyway,’ Bryn said as he stood up, ‘I’ve go’ a few people to catch up with bu’ I’ll be back. Actually, I’ll see if I can’ find you a coa’. You’ve go’ to be cold and it’s only going to ge’ colder now.’ Bryn lost a few leaves when he stood up. Blodwyn wondered how often that must happen.

‘It gets colder?’ Llyr asked.

Bryn laughed and waved over his shoulder as he walked away.

Llyr hadn't really been aware of the seasons inside Stac. Closed in behind so much stone, there was always a chill in the air. But when he thought back, he could remember a few times when it seemed even colder and it never really got hot anywhere but the Rope Chamber. Even then, it wasn't exactly hot but close, thick air and the sense that you're breathing each other in. Blodwyn couldn't feel temperature anymore and hadn't for a long time, so she struggled to remember anything close to a pattern of seasons. After watching day fall into night then the light rising again, it made sense to her, she accepted it.

Llyr was still intrigued by the people in grey and he couldn't shake his focus from the feathers on their backs. Their feathers were all different and none looked like his. Most of theirs were quite small but there was a rich variety of colour; browns, blues, reds, white and even green. He could never wear his feather, he thought, as it could easily come off. These people weren't afraid of that though and as long as Llyr observed them not once did he see them lose a feather. They sat with straight backs as they engaged one another. Llyr and Blodwyn watched one of them as he twisted his necklace around, his hand clasped around the pendant.

Bryn thudded down between them.

'Freshly woven and sewn,' he said, holding a large folded cloth in his hands.

'Wow, what is it?' Llyr asked, hoping it didn't unfold into a convincing bush.

'Coa', but it'll probably run very long on you,' Bryn said and patted Llyr on the shoulder.

'That's so kind,' Blodwyn said with a look of mistrust.

'Well, it came from tha' throuple over there, Dylan, Mabli and Haf,' Bryn said and pointed, the three people, two women and a man, waved in reply and Bryn called them over.

Bryn placed the folded coat into Llyr's lap and it felt heavy on his legs. He wondered how he would ever move in it.

'Hello,' they said.

'I'm sorry, I've nothing for you,' Llyr blurted out.

'That's alright, we don't really have any use for payment,' Mabli said.

'You could share though, what have you got to share?' Dylan asked.

'What do you mean?' Blodwyn asked quietly.

'Duw Bryn said you were first timers,' Haf laughed.

'Tell us about yourself. Have you learned anything on your journey and did you come across anything worth visiting or seeing?' Mabli instructed. She flicked her hair out of her eyes at the same time as Blodwyn. They chuckled when they noticed.

Llyr and Blodwyn gazed at each other for a long moment. How could either of them say it all? Where to begin? They kept interrupting each other and stepping on their words, not knowing where to start until silence swallowed their stuttered efforts. Llyr looked at the three expectant faces. Between them, on the floor, a large beetle hurried through the grass. Its shiny black shell glistened in the firelight. Llyr snatched it up off the floor and popped it into his mouth. Just as he was crunching, he noticed another one and picked that up too and held it in his fist.

The three listeners looked shocked.

'I'm sorry, did you?' Llyr offered.

Haf got up and headed towards another group, retching as she walked.

Llyr popped the next beetle into his mouth and crunched. He found another and offered it to Mabli and Dylan. They shook their heads and Dylan choked.

‘Any idea roughly where you’re headed next?’ Dylan winced.

‘We thought about just seeing where the woods end and where that takes us really,’ Blodwyn lied, thinking of the huge expanse of water.

‘Are you sure we can’t give you anything for the food or the clothes?’ Llyr asked.

Mabli spat out her answer, ‘Why don’t you gather up lots of wood and dump them next to the fires?’

Llyr nodded and dutifully got up and set off into the darkness.

‘Anyway, we’re turning in for the night,’ Dylan said.

They quickly joined Haf at another fire. Blodwyn didn’t have to guess what they were talking about when she saw the fingers pointing at Llyr. Most of the living had turned in and the sky was full of stars. Conversation had died down and she listened to the sound of her fire crackling. Blodwyn thought of how much more she could see on top of the mountain. She sighed. She’d resisted the urge to check on her foot throughout the day, but she avoided it no longer. She lifted the hem of her dress. Another inch or so, at least, had gone. She tried to lean in for a closer inspection and began to question where the decay started.

Llyr dropped an armful of sticks by their fire and he threw half of them into the flames.

‘Mind if I?’ Llyr asked and he pointed at a spot on the floor next to the fire.

‘No go on, I bet you’re exhausted.’

‘I am a bit, I wanted to go before but didn’t feel like I could yet you know, but it seems safe here, right? If a bit, you know, weird,’ he asked Blodwyn, nodding at Haf and Mabli.

‘It does,’ Blodwyn replied before adding, ‘for now.’

She wanted to ask if he’d seen what she was doing, but he was too preoccupied with trying to see where he was going in the darkness.

Before long, Llyr was in a deep snoring sleep. He didn’t usually snore, so Blodwyn knew that he really must be exhausted. As she watched over him, she thought of dreams: private episodes of escapism unfolding in your mind. It had been decades since she’d had one. She wondered if it would be strange to ask him about his. The only one of hers that she could remember involved leaving Stac and she wished she could send the image of the gathering or preferably the view from the mountain to her old self. She thought, sometimes when you remember something maybe you’re just recalling the last time you remembered it rather than the original event itself? She had to remain committed to the moment she thought, make new memories even if they risk disappearing. She thought of her foot before adding that all does, eventually, everything goes.

‘Nos da,’ a voice said.

It was the woman from earlier who was missing most of one arm. Now that she was standing over Blodwyn, she could see that her legs were missing.

‘Rhian,’ she said.

‘Blodwyn.’

They spoke at length about their respective journey. Blodwyn grew more and more comfortable in talking to Rhian. Rhian explained that she travelled with another couple who,

like her, died about fifty years previously. They talked about the insides of trees and Rhian discussed the various birds and beasts she'd seen when she suddenly asked, 'So how about you? How did you come to die?'

Blodwyn paused. She'd never been directly asked before, even though it was a natural question. No one escaped it, it was the one thing guaranteed to happen to everyone, yet there was a reluctance to discuss the topic. Hers was an intrinsic fact about her that she'd never had to explain or retell. The moment hardly mattered, she thought, it was more about the effects.

'Duw, the structure I spent my life in... When they were installing a new door on our level there was a protest, a borderline riot. That was beautiful. To see so many people stand up and say, "here I am" you know? They, those above us, were sealing us in. It happened every once in a while. Overcrowding, decay, a need for anyone with privilege to put some distance between those who have and those who don't. The gap widens all the time. The worst part wasn't even the death or the fact that they were doing it. It was seeing so many people argue *for* it not against. They even helped build it. Can you imagine? Helping to make the lock to your own door? Anyway, some of us resisted, we pushed back against the new stone door. Some of us were crushed. A few of us, well, you know,' Blodwyn shrugged her shoulders. 'There can only be a handful of us left that remember.'

'I do, but it's ok. What of the others? Gone or might as well be?' Rhian asked.

'Might as well be yes,' Blodwyn admitted.

'Thank you for sharing. I drowned in a Llyn. I'd gone swimming with a friend – suppose he was a boyfriend at the time – and I was caught by something, some force in the water, spinning and pulling and down I went. It took a long time for me to forget that feeling of desperation. Wanting to breathe, knowing you can't, then you're forced to,' she paused, 'suppose it was different for you, being crushed. I bet you at least wanted a hat.'

Blodwyn chuckled. 'Can I ask you something though? Sorry if it is rude.'

'When did I lose my hand and foot and how long has it been and all that?' Rhian smiled.

'How did you guess?' Blodwyn asked sheepishly.

'I saw you checking your foot before, earlier, so I'm guessing it is recent for you.'

'It is, but how long?' Blodwyn asked and had to stop herself from staring at Rhian's missing limbs. 'Relatively recent,' she muttered to herself.

'I'm sure you know; it is different for everyone. But it is better out here. It has to be and it is gradual until it isn't. You must have seen that? I don't think I've long left before I'm gibbering and jabbering.' Rhian said and Blodwyn noticed the briefest glimpse of a glazed look in her eyes. The familiar thousand-yard stare.

'You seem resigned to it?' Blodwyn suggested.

'Well, what's the use of worrying. I have all of this,' Rhian gestured to her surroundings. 'Accepting makes it easier. Surely? It has to.'

Blodwyn shrank a little before she spoke, feeling as though she wanted to curl into a ball. She knew what she wanted to say, but she felt stupid for thinking it, even before it left her mouth as a sound.

'I guess, I guess I just want to be somewhere nice when it happens and know that there are better things than Stac out here. I just can't stop though, I can't stay put,' she looked at Rhian and waited for ridicule.

‘I think that’s what most of us want, at least, everyone I’ve met. Some just don’t know it yet and others refuse to acknowledge that until it is too late. You keep going Blodwyn. It doesn’t matter where, just keep going.’

Rhian placed her hand up against an invisible pane of glass and Blodwyn reciprocated. The night air blew through them. They pushed together until they could no longer see where one ended and one began.

‘Duw knows I’ve had enough depressing encounters with people like us to last a third lifetime,’ Rhian chuckled. ‘Don’t watch, don’t focus,’ she said as she drew her hand away.

Blodwyn couldn’t help but shoot a glance at her foot again and Rhian smiled and shook her head. She inspected her own missing appendages and laughed.

‘It’s hard. I have to practice what I preach. You and I, we might have days, we might have years. I’d honestly rather it was fast, not slow. Wouldn’t you?’

She rose up to leave and smiled at the sleeping Llyr.

‘Travel well, Blodwyn.’

‘Travel well, Rhian.’

HORIZON

The orange light of a new dawn glowed above the clearing and the fires were like red teardrops. Llyr rose. He was so used to seeing Blodwyn somewhere nearby that when he couldn't see her, he panicked. She might not have a physical body but in the time they'd been together, he had never felt alone. Most people were still asleep, or they lay and talked to those they had slept with, rather than the communal conversation of the night before. Llyr could see much further into the woods than last night and opted to walk into the trees and gather wood whilst keeping an eye on the dwindling fires for Blodwyn. His new coat was heavy and came down to his knees. It was considerably warmer than his sackcloth tunic alone and he was thankful, although he imagined that it might slow him down. It chafed uncomfortably on his shoulders.

As soon as he'd gathered as much wood as he could carry, he cut back into the clearing and dumped about half of his load next to a fire with someone stoking it. They nodded acknowledgement as he spread embers out and broke up smouldering logs. They briefly looked up and thanked Llyr, who nodded acknowledgment. He watched as the person built a pyramid with the wood and they blew on the embers and small flames until, between breaths, they leapt up the freshly placed logs and sticks. It only seemed to take mere moments for the fire to grow into a generous blaze. The heat blasted Llyr's face, forcing him to take a step back. The person then took a ceramic pot and loaded it with vegetables, brushing soil off them before covering them with water.

Blodwyn sat in the next fire over and she waved at Llyr as he approached. Llyr liked seeing her smile like but as he neared, he recognised that there was something false in it. Blodwyn waited until he was in ear shot before she stood up.

‘Bore da, Llyr,’ Blodwyn started, ‘this is Tomos, he’s been in this clearing for years.’ She gestured to an elderly man sat opposite her in the fire.

‘Years,’ Tomos replied and he didn’t even look up at Llyr he just stared ahead. As though nothing lay behind the eyes but echoes of a person long departed.

‘Are you getting much out of this Blodwyn?’ Llyr whispered.

Blodwyn hadn’t gotten anything out of him really, other than that he had tried to build a house with his wife decades ago but he couldn’t remember his wife’s name and there was some confusion as to whether this was the right clearing. He had decided to stay put until he could remember and it was then that he realised he had lost his arms. Blodwyn was still reeling from watching Rhian and her companions leave just a few hours earlier. Tomos told her she could see more of herself in the fire so she sat in the flames. She discovered that it wasn’t true but maybe this deception was what kept Tomos going. Rhian’s preference of fast over slow kept coming back to Blodwyn.

‘Not really,’ she replied, ‘I want to get gone to be honest.’

‘Well, we can gladly get going,’ Llyr beamed. When Blodwyn stepped out of the fire, he attempted to arrange the wood as he had just seen. He blew on the embers and small flames and as they chased their way up the wood, something in the arrangement gave way and the pile collapsed in on itself. He enjoyed building the fire. It felt like something he needed to learn and be familiar with – an important word in the language of outside. He knew he wouldn’t feel the heat of these fires for more than a moment, but he would need heat again and he smiled at this realisation. Tomos stared ahead, open mouthed and didn’t notice when Blodwyn waved goodbye.

Llyr stood over the spot where he had slept. He noted the him-shaped indent in the grass and thought it smaller and thinner than he was, but he was pleased at his impression in

the ground. They looked back over the camp. A few people had risen, getting up to begin cooking or continuing making something in their lap. Still, most still lay where they had slept and talked to each other. Llyr pictured a new shallow valley left by all the sleeping bodies. It was impossible to tell whether these people had travelled together or whether they had just chosen to sleep together but the clearing didn't care. To the clearing, he thought, they were like several branches of the same tree.

The people in grey robes had gone and their fire had been stoked and rebuilt with a few big bowls of food arranged near it. They had also left some short wooden benches and a few large blankets. Llyr turned around on the spot, in the hopes of asking someone if he could take one of the bowls but everyone seemed preoccupied.

'Just take it,' Blodwyn whispered.

Llyr took one of the smaller ones and sat on one of the benches. He felt exposed as he ate and he shovelled the food in so quickly that he thought he might be sick. He considered throwing the wooden bowl into the fire before placing it gently back down in the same spot he'd picked it up from.

'Thanks,' he said to Blodwyn.

'For what?' Blodwyn replied.

'Waiting,' Llyr smiled.

'Go?' Blodwyn asked.

'Go,' Llyr agreed.

Llyr faced the camp and waved at anyone who would notice. Out of beds and beside fires, a few arms shot up in reply. One of the arms, rising higher than the others, had several

leaves attached to it. They left to the echoes of well wishing and empty promises of seeing one another again.

As soon as they left the clearing, the forest thickened and Blodwyn felt happier in the knowledge that they were back on a path. It was only thin, as though it was a trail left by a small animal, but she liked the way it meandered through the trees. Later, just when she was itching for a sense of progress, the path straightened out. Sunlight dappled down through the leaves. Llyr felt much warmer and considered taking the coat off. He didn't know whether he should trust the idea that it would get colder, but knew that he didn't stick out quite so much anymore. Though his clothes were much like those of the Lost, theirs were cleaner and neater and they looked like they belonged. Although he didn't want to join the Lost, he grew jealous of their knowledge of the land and thought that passing as one of them might take him one step closer to understanding.

Llyr and Blodwyn didn't talk much that day, but both felt comfortable in their silence. In the quiet, they had begun to appreciate the sounds of the forest and Llyr thought he could discern the difference between the chirps and squeaks of birds in the trees. He imagined that one of those noises belonged to the bird that gifted him a feather, although that bird always remained out of sight. It was odd, he thought, given the size of the feather compared to most of the birds he'd seen.

Whenever there was a strong gust or breath of wind, Blodwyn would stop and close her eyes. The sound of the wind rushing through the leaves, the branches clattering together and the thinner saplings leaning in the breeze made her think she could feel it. Instead of it blowing around her, it blew right through her and she allowed herself to drift a little, picturing that she was at the whim of this living force. Wind had been everywhere outside; she thought that the world breathed in an irregular rhythm and imagined that they may even

happen upon a giant mouth from which the wind was birthed. Llyr watched, guessing what she was doing. He wouldn't dare interrupt her, so he merely paused and watched while the hair stood up on his exposed calves. She swayed a little never quite in the right direction, but with each attempt she became more accurate. When the wind died down, they'd continue on, tuned into the scurrying creatures darting between bushes and trees.

Gradually, the forest quietened. Soon, Llyr realised that the noises had either thinned out completely or were left somewhere far behind him. There seemed to be little ahead. At the same time, Blodwyn thought it was much clearer and though the sun was at full power that did not explain the absence of trees. Forests and woods ended, they knew that, but this was different. They emerged into a clearing but one which gripped both of their hearts and tugged.

They stood in what was the edge of the forest, but for fifty feet or more ahead every tree had been felled. The stumps stood out from the ground like a hand with all the fingers and thumb crudely removed. Blodwyn thought of her foot and was terrified to glance down at it in case even more of it had gone. She tentatively lifted the hem of her dress without Llyr noticing. Stroking one of the stumps, Llyr delicately felt the little ridges which rose up between rings. None of the felled trees were there. Blodwyn ached for the loss of life which for some reason, one she couldn't fathom, didn't strike her as a gradual death. This felt sudden. A rip. A hack. Not a cough and a whimper.

Llyr sat down in front of a particularly small and thin stump. It appeared as though someone could grip what was left with one hand and pull it right out of the ground. He didn't want to, but he thought it cruel to leave the stump as a reminder or a warning to the other trees. Now that he looked back at the thickened forest, knowing the gathering lay within, it was no surprise that the perimeter treeline seemed to face inward away from the destruction.

He thought that if they could move, they'd surely be off and away from this place. Then it hit him, could they be left like this so they might eventually grow back? He had no idea. But if it was anything like berries or mushrooms, then there might be hope. Devastating though it may be, it is still not as bad as not coming back.

Ahead of them was a clear view of the horizon. The land sloped downwards, reaching towards a great blue expanse of sea. But, not far before it, there was a familiar grey shape in the way. It loomed larger than their Stac but it had the same basic characteristics, they could see that even from a distance. It was interesting though, because just beyond the new Stac there was a grassy blob, a line like a fuzzy eyebrow above the stone. There was a slice of land that separated the Stac from the sea.

Opting to stand in one of the larger stumps, Blodwyn sank down to just below her waist and closed her eyes. The pulse was still there, but it was faint. It rose up from the roots, spreading out in a tiny echo over the top of the stump. Blodwyn thought the tree was reaching for its lost body. She stayed there for a moment and willed the pulse to get stronger, not faster but fuller. Blodwyn pictured the pulse spreading out and upward into a thin outline of a tree. She imagined what she must look like to Llyr, lost up to her waist and stuck in place. That seemed like an inevitability to her at times, only partially visible and rooted in place. They had to keep moving.

Taking a big stride out of the stump, and avoiding the few stumps in front of her, Llyr noticed Blodwyn's foot was missing. He looked away just in time, but wanted to ask how long it had been gone and whether it was spreading up her leg. He looked down at his own feet and noticed that he'd narrowly missed stepping on something. It was a bird's nest, complete with a few eggs. The circular mess of tiny twigs which were threaded together with precision felt delicate in Llyr's hands.

‘Come on,’ Blodwyn started, ‘Let’s keep going. It’s too... tragic here.’

‘Sure,’ Llyr said and he caught himself trying to look at Blodwyn’s feet again as he put the nest down.

The land sloped downwards towards the new Stac. The closer they got, the more they could make out. Neither of them had to work hard to imagine the inside. Small baskets were ascending and descending the outside of Stac and an intense anger swelled up for all those years where Llyr didn’t know what was on the other side of the rope. Blodwyn scanned the surface for any windows. Once she saw the first small open squares, she imagined the view and pictured a face, not unlike her own, peering out and dreaming of walking outside. There was no face though, no hole in the side but an enormous crack, just like the one they’d walked away from, stretching almost from top to bottom. Two baskets were lowered into place along its length and the pair assumed that they were attempting to repair it. Given the fact that most of the other baskets were attending to the needs of the top layer, it was safe to say that the fissure would remain. Both wondered how the whole structure hadn’t fallen.

Again, the top layer was mostly open to the elements apart from the occasional turrets and towers and other stony protrusions. One was a rounded bump which looked a bit like a mushroom, poking up out of the middle. They wanted to look away and had no intention of going inside, Llyr wished he could destroy it and Blodwyn longed to open the crack a bit more to free all of those inside. Both concluded that even if they could act their actions would most likely result in a crushing death for those of the lower layers and that those on the top would walk a path to safety made up of the bones of those beneath.

Guiding each other in a wide arc, Llyr and Blodwyn attempted to bypass Stac altogether. But when they drew alongside the northern end, they heard a voice. They rounded Stac’s thick corner and there was one of the grey-robed people shouting up at an unseen

listener. The person had his eyes closed and though his voice was raised he didn't appear angry. Between words he was smiling and it looked as though he often hugged himself or an invisible person in the air before him. As they neared, they listened.

‘...everything, absolutely everything lies beneath my wings there is no mountain I cannot rise above and no sea too wide that I cannot cross. From this we know, we *know* my friends that we too can overcome and that, no matter how long, the object may seem insurmountable we can endure and fly. Endurance is patience multiplied by determination, again these are virtues you can see in any tree or hedge or overhead. I ask again, come out, come out and breathe...’

He continued. Llyr was interested in the wooden pendant around the man's neck, which was larger than he remembered at the gathering and it had a symbol on it. Blodwyn pointed at a hoard of people in the distance, next to which was an enormous pile of logs. They could just about hear the noise of organised work in between the man's preaching. Still focussed on the pendant, Llyr barely acknowledged Blodwyn's discovery.

‘What's that around his neck?’ Llyr whispered to Blodwyn.

‘Don't know, looks like a necklace of some type. But look at that,’ she said and pointed once again to the horizon.

Llyr finally took in what was ahead of them. It looked busy. Dozens, possibly hundreds of people, it was difficult to tell from the distance, were working away like ants. Behind and beyond them was grass then endless water. Llyr thought they looked like little mushrooms twisting through vista.

‘Greetings travellers,’ a cheerful voice came.

The man had stopped preaching and his happy gaze was now firmly fixed on Blodwyn and Llyr. He nodded at them and approached. Llyr considered running but the stranger didn't seem threatening in a conventional sense, although there was definitely something annoying about him. It was in his wide smile, in the centre of his otherwise empty face.

'What brings you this way? I'm sure you're not from in there?' he asked and he pointed to the Stac.

'Just travelling,' Blodwyn replied.

'What were you doing and what is that around your neck?' Llyr sounded churlish in his enquiry, but he was hopeful that he wasn't being too rude.

'Which would you like me to answer first? I'm Nathaniel by the way,' the man replied with a short nod-like bow.

'Whichever you like,' Blodwyn offered.

'Well, one of us comes here every day to reveal the Certainties to anyone in there who will listen. Some of my fellows admit they feel a little tested by the stone, but I like to imagine that it is an opportunity to practice. Practice makes perfect, perfect brings me closer to Themme.'

'Ok,' Blodwyn said, not understanding a word.

'As for the pendant well, you can have one each if you like. Well, I'd give one to you,' he nodded to Blodwyn, 'but you wouldn't have much use for it but we know why that is,' and he bowed.

He rummaged in a hidden pouch within his robe, taking out a new wooden pendant and handing it to Llyr. It was circular and smooth with a carving of a bird soaring with spread

wings on the top. The beak pointed straight upwards like an upside-down teardrop and the wingtip feathers were each a different colour, like no bird Llyr or Blodwyn had ever seen. Llyr knew the colours of his own feather well and he recognised them in one part of the carving, despite the fact that there were so many others alongside.

‘What is it?’ Llyr asked.

Approaching, the man gently took the necklace from Llyr and hung it around his neck. He patted the pendant three times and then tapped his own.

‘It is, Themme,’ he replied.

Llyr eyed the pendant doubtfully and without realising, placed a reassuring hand at the feather on his waist. Blodwyn wouldn’t admit it out loud, but even she was curious, especially given that Nathaniel’s bow had been aimed mostly at her. Llyr remembered seeing a pendant in one of the abandoned tents by the lake. A small gasp escaped his mouth and he stared at Blodwyn. She approached and nodded at Llyr in silent agreement. She didn’t need to speak. Her eyes said it was the same.

‘Are you going to the Ynys Gybi?’ Nathaniel broke the silence with his question.

‘Is that-’ Llyr started, not knowing how he was going to articulate his thoughts.

‘Yes, it is. I may see you there later,’ Nathaniel beamed. ‘Excuse me, do you mind if I continue? I don’t have much left and I should like to finish.’

Blodwyn nodded to the wall and Nathaniel replied with another of his slow nod-bows at her, whispering something that neither of them heard. She thought it sounded like, *to air you return*, but she wasn’t sure. He turned to face the wall, waving for Llyr and Blodwyn to stand beside him and continued his preaching.

‘I hadn’t planned on talking about this,’ he called to the wall, ‘but I have encountered someone very special just now and so we come to the final Certainty. Our essence, that which makes us who we are, different from one another and separates us from plants, is so light and pure that eventually when our journey is complete, we serve Themme. We become the very air we breathe and that which Themme’s servants here sail through. Just as fish swim through water, so too we move through the air. This is the greatest moment of our lives and we should all be honoured to serve and join Themme on the wing. This brings me back to the first Certainty – Lightness is pure. Remove your burdens and escape from your stone. To think of stone is to look down, to think of air is to look up...’

Blodwyn set off in the direction of what they now knew to be a small island. Llyr, transfixed, wanted to stay within earshot and listen to more of what Nathaniel had to say. Blodwyn had wanted the same, but something in the speech angered her and she wasn’t sure why. Nathaniel seemed so certain. Blodwyn believed that she and Llyr must look like confused children to someone so self-assured. She thought about what he’d said about becoming air. Lifting the hem of her skirt, she saw that more of her shin had disappeared. The other foot, though still there, was faint and when the clouds moved overhead and the full blaze of the sun cast upon it, it was difficult to see. Llyr was too busy examining his pendant to notice what Blodwyn was doing. She decided to slow down a little and Llyr walked right through her before he noticed the change in speed. He snapped out of his fascination and wonder and apologised to Blodwyn.

Ahead, spanning the short but deep gap between the mainland and Ynys Gybi, lay a crude bridge constructed entirely of wood. There was enormous pile of logs on both sides and dozens of the winged people crawled about on the structure. It took a moment for Llyr and Blodwyn to see that people were moving logs from the mainland to the island. With great effort, a dozen men or more carried just one log between them. As they neared the bridge,

they felt the full force of the sea air. It blasted Llyr with such strength he thought that he was going to fall and he braced himself turning his attention to Blodwyn. It was clear from her face that, even though it blew through her and she couldn't be forced off the bridge, she wasn't enjoying the strength of the air. She settled into the realisation that she would be alright, but she thought about turning back. Before she was interrupted, she had begun thinking about proposing that they choose another point of the forest to enter.

'Pilgrims!' A voice shouted.

A woman jogged over to them from the bridge. They could see that she was smiling before they could properly identify the features of her face. When she neared, her jog settled into a quick walk and she thrust her arms out wide as if to hug an invisible stranger. Her sharp face was contorted into the most exaggerated grin the pair had ever seen.

'Welcome, I assume you're going over?' she beamed.

'We want to yes but-' Llyr stopped short of saying what he wanted to, which was that they weren't sure about going over, in case he caused any offence. He thought that the woman's happiness was so extreme that he didn't want to see her plunge into sadness or hurt.

'We're seeing where the journey takes us,' Blodwyn said.

'Come on over, I'll take you,' the woman said.

'Oh no need,' Llyr quickly added, 'we can sort ourselves out, we're getting pretty good at it.'

'Nonsense, it's no trouble, come,' the woman kept eying Llyr's necklace as she spoke to him. It felt like it was burning a hole into his chest.

Blodwyn was set on not going too quickly and she quickly fell behind. Llyr noticed and consciously dropped back to be alongside her. He couldn't tell if everyone they passed

was nodding at him, her or both of them. Many of them eyed his necklace before smiling and waving and a few of them even made that odd head back arms out gesture to Blodwyn. Their guide walked on ahead, offering a full tour complete with an explanation. Llyr picked up some of it but he wasn't that bothered about the bridge. It seemed sturdy enough and certainly had a warmer quality to it than stone, but he couldn't help but feel like the wood would have been better off as trees. Blodwyn noticed the grain in the planks making up the path of the bridge and thought it looked a little bit like the inside of a tree but somehow the inordinately straight lines and fixed points perturbed her.

They were almost on the other side when the woman ahead of them stopped and finally realised that she had been talking to herself.

'It's the view isn't it? I never tire of it myself. Sometimes it stops me in my tracks too.'

'Yes, sure,' Blodwyn replied.

'May I ask,' she directed her question to Blodwyn and stepped a little closer towards her and peered down her nose, 'how far along are you?'

'Excuse me?' Blodwyn replied. She wasn't hurt, or upset but was confused by the question.

'What I mean to say is, how long since your initial passing?'

'About fifty years,' Blodwyn replied. The words hung between them for a long moment. It struck her as odd that Llyr had never asked her that question. She looked to him and he had that same furrowed brow he often wore, somewhere between confused and curious. She could tell he liked her, and the feeling was mutual. She reasoned that he probably didn't care what the number was and she was right, he didn't. Surprise flickered

across his face and passed like a dying spark. He was momentarily surprised, but had no feelings beyond that, numbers didn't matter to him. He thought her voice, the way she still flicked her hair out of her face and her confidence, far more important.

‘So quite far then, the disintegration is probably already upon you.’

When she saw that Blodwyn's face had darkened, she quickly followed it up with, ‘I'm sorry I don't mean to cause any offence. It's just, with the pendant and well, you're here so I assumed. We can look after you, we can help. What you're going through is normal and very special. We all do it.’

‘You mustn't assume,’ Blodwyn said. She glared at the woman and drifted over to her, so she was an inch from her nose. She wanted to shove her into the water and thought about Rhian's death. How dare she say those things when she didn't even remotely understand.

‘You're probably tired,’ the woman squeaked, ‘let me go and get you some refreshment.’ With that she disappeared.

The land on the island consisted mostly of small hillocks with one peak dominating the eastern side. On the hill closest to them a stone stuck out like a great incisor and loomed above them. Llyr thought it looked like the stone was staring at them, waiting, he felt pulled towards it and Blodwyn cautiously followed. As they crested the hill, more stones were revealed. They stood in a vague circle and each looked quite different from the other. One was bent at a strange angle out of the ground as though leaning out to touch another whilst a other stones had straight edges carved into them. Despite Blodwyn's fears, none of them glowed when Llyr touched them. He couldn't explain it, even to himself, but instinctively knew that these were different from the stone that had surrounded him for much of his life.

That stone was cold, unfeeling and cruel. It divided. Not at all like the Tad Carreg he was told to love.

These standing stones were, of course, cold to the touch, but there was something living about them, like a tree. They'd been placed here in a circle for a purpose. Some of them looked like they'd been planted in the earth but the incisor stone, gnarled and crooked, seemed as natural as a river. These, Llyr thought, were a different kind of current which ran into the earth and not just along its surface. He set about stroking and inspecting them individually, finding that each one was his favourite until he came to the next. Blodwyn was more wary, as to her the circle to her resembled a trap, she believed that if she wandered between them they would light up and seize her. Passing through the incisor stone, she inspected it from the inside and found that it was just stone with no glowing runes, no pain. All that was left was a kernel of curiosity as to their purpose. She regarded each of the silent stones in turn.

‘Why?’ she whispered.

‘I know,’ Llyr replied.

Between them, only the grass moved. Llyr managed to block out the distant sounds of the arrival of a log and, closing his eyes, he sat with his back up against the incisor stone. There was something there, he was convinced of that. Although it could have been in the earth or in a stone, he didn't think so, instead believing that there was something between the ancient sentinels. He had no idea what it was that he was referring to, but he knew it was positive. It didn't mean either of them harm. A small smile crawled across his lips and he imagined that the stone smiled too, like an elderly person watching a child at play, knowing they can't join in but sharing their joy.

‘I heard we had visitors, no one comes to this relic anymore. Especially not those wishing to join the Wings.’

The voice belonged to Michael. A tall man in the same grey robes as everyone else but his belt was brilliant white and his pendant was noticeably bigger. He bowed to Blodwyn and rose slowly before he approached Llyr, who remained leaning against the incisor stone. Michael regarded each of the stones in turn and tutted.

‘A relic,’ he started, and he made stern eye contact with Llyr and Blodwyn sequentially as he continued, ‘are you here for this? No one even remembers what they’re for. It’s the unpleasant hangover from a more brutal time.’ He spat at the centre of the circle, ‘heathens.’

ADRIFT

WAVES

Countless feathered shoulders of the Wings flitted around the site. Some sang while others worked, stopping only to wipe the sweat from their brow. Another log rolled in and was set about with axes. Behind a pile of planks, lying at an uncomfortable angle, the ship loomed. Waves crested the bow and Llyr wondered whether any of the water went inside. It was difficult for him to imagine the giant object afloat. The angle suggested it would slide forward and scrape along the seabed. His eyes were drawn to the ropes.

‘I’m not touching one of those,’ he muttered to himself.

‘Don’t worry,’ Blodwyn soothed, ‘I don’t think you’ll have to.’

Llyr had tears in his eyes. It could have been the wind; it was so much stronger and more constant here than it had been anywhere else, biting as it blew. Feathers and robes billowed. Llyr blinked and rubbed his eyes. He was impressed at the resilience of the feathers, fluttering but never leaving.

‘Are you sure about this?’ he asked, ‘because I’m not.’

‘To be honest, no, I’m not,’ Blodwyn replied.

‘Go on.’

‘Well, part of me wants to head back in, get off this island and follow the water’s edge. But then we’d have to go past that Stac again and as soon as I think of that I just want to run, you know?’

‘I know,’ said Llyr gravely.

‘And there is something about that,’ she nodded at the horizon.

Llyr found that despite having grass under his feet and fresh air on his skin, his mind occasionally wandered back to Stac. He had to remind himself that he didn't truly *miss* it because that was all he'd ever known, but facing endless unknowns forced him to take some comfort in the known. Even if that was a 'stone prison' as he heard someone put it. He sometimes missed Mererid's smile. Every night when he tried to sleep, he adopted the necessary position for sleeping comfortably in his twll. But any sentimentality was swiftly blown away by rage, aimed squarely at all the faces that watched him climb out of the hole. He'd tried to convince them to leave. Worst of all, he knew how miserable, bitter and hate-filled so many of those faces had been. They could have walked away. Every time he pictured it, Ivor's scowl hurt him. Llyr looked at his hands, his callouses were less prominent than they used to be. Even without the countless tiny scars, Llyr remembered every wound he had suffered and, clenching his fists, he thought of the other hands gripping ropes in the chamber. Part of him wanted to stand there and continue the debate until he won. He didn't have to be a leader and he didn't want to be as it would surely be too much work. But none of those faces could see each other in the sunlight and feel fresh water on their skin and that was wrong. The rest of him knew though, that he would never win that argument. He was but one voice against generations of habit and a fear far stronger than the stone in which it lived.

If he could, he would have torn it down. But that enormous crack – the whole edifice was doomed to collapse. Unless of course, they addressed the fissure and repaired it in some way? But there was no sign of that happening. He needed to stop thinking about it. In his daydreams he imagined climbing into one of the baskets, forcing the occupant to rise up to the top level and then threatening to kill them in front of anyone who will listen unless there were some changes. His fantasy had a few holes, the most prominent of which came in the form of the blank faces of the listeners. He had only glimpsed their life from afar and even though he couldn't confirm it, somehow, he knew that they wouldn't have cared about the

death of some worker. They'd likely have Llyr murdered too just for good measure. So maybe he just kills the operative and rise up to take someone from the top level. But then, the same fate. The thought that other people, beyond those he'd known, were subjected to Stac life was enough to decide on the ocean. He was but one relatively small man. There was a phrase he'd heard, something like, if you think you're too small to make a difference, try spending the night with a mosquito. He thought, the mosquito is just a nuisance until it is found and squashed. No one loses sleep over a dead mosquito.

'So,' Blodwyn continued, 'I want to keep going, for sure.' She paused and said quietly, 'for as long as I can.'

Llyr caught himself trying to look at Blodwyn's feet.

'Blodwyn, do you ever think about going back?' he asked.

Blodwyn's response was swift and accompanied by a frown. 'There is no going back, we can only go forward.'

'That's not what I asked,' Llyr said.

Blodwyn considered her response. Truthfully, she hadn't thought about going back. Her attention was almost always ahead of her, not least because everyone she knew and had been close to was gone. Images of those people, wandering empty vessels, forced her to look ahead. She had to prioritise moving forward, powered by the drive to such as much as she could, before she could no longer be seen.

'No, I can't.'

On the beach, there was no escaping the insistent sea breeze. Llyr burrowed his head further into his coat, covering his chin. The sea had the briefest suggestion of a path – a line of foam and a darker shade of blue that curved through the mass which stretched out towards

the horizon. It wasn't straight but their brief and sporadic reveals teased something in Llyr and invisible threads pulled him forward into the sea. Despite knowing it must all be water, further out it looked solid, as though he could walk on it.

Llyr nodded at the ship, 'do you trust it?'

'I don't,' Blodwyn paused and waited for Llyr to turn back to her, 'but I don't distrust it either. I just want to keep going and this is the way. I think.'

It was rare, Llyr thought, for Blodwyn to be so unsure of herself.

She believed that she could feel her legs disintegrating. In a gentle fizzing not dissimilar to pins and needles. Though, of course, it had been so long since she had felt that strange numbing sensation. Her first encounter with the phenomenon was when she was a child. She'd wished Llyr hadn't mentioned Stac because now her thoughts were marching up and down its corridors.

*

She'd slept awkwardly on her side and there was nothing strange about that, until something shocked her out of sleep and she woke thinking her arm had burst. She couldn't feel it and, in the darkness, it was hard to convince herself that it was there. Help came, as it often did, from her Nain, although there was little of her left at this point. She was merely a face above a vague suggestion of a torso. Little of the conversation remained in Blodwyn's memory, but the image she held onto was her hand trying to pinch sensation into her arm while someone with neither tried to reassure her.

'Please don't be frightened,' the face reassured.

She was terrified. The voice was familiar but distant. Part of what it said was surely aimed at itself. She pinched her arm so much that it bled and the subsequent warmth was the

only thing that truly reassured her that the arm was still there. Nain's wrinkled smile should have been a comfort. The decades hadn't dulled the shame Blodwyn felt at her inability to look at her Nain for more than a few seconds and this was worsened by the lack of detail in her memory. There was just her own body, which felt like a foreign object. Nain's face loomed over her and her eyes drifted between comforting warmth and a familiar emptiness. The only colour was a tiny spot of blood surrounded by darkness.

'Please, don't be frightened,' Nain repeated.

Blodwyn understood the hate a lot of people felt towards people like her. It was driven by fear. They were terrified of the inevitable, not to be anything or anyone and your last cogent thought, if you could put aside the horror, was jealousy. Even a shadow had more life than the memory of Nain.

*

Blodwyn's legs itched as she led the way toward the ship.

'Ah, passengers, VIPs' the voice belonged to a face which peered down at them from the deck. 'Please, come around.'

A gangplank reached down from the ship to the beach. A few people were precariously carrying large boxes and barrels onto the completed ship. Next to it, another one was taking shape. The hull, though still unfinished, would be much larger than the first ship and it seemed that this was where most of the people were engaged in work. Wood was being shaped right next to the ship then hammered into place. Llyr estimated that it would be at least double the size of the first ship when finished and everything about the unbuilt ship was more substantial, with thicker woodwork and the occasional use of metal.

'Let the guests up,' the voice boomed.

The plank was cleared and Blodwyn and Llyr made the climb onto the ship. Blodwyn floated above the plank and part of her wanted to lift the hem of her skirt to see where she was putting her feet. Llyr followed, but couldn't keep up with her. He wobbled a few times and jumped the last foot up, thudding onto the deck.

With an insincere smile and open arms, Michael greeted them.

‘Welcome aboard,’ he said.

The deck wasn't as busy as they had anticipated. Michael was in stern conversation with a few other people. It seemed that most of Michael's conversations were serious and Blodwyn didn't like the way that he spoke to Llyr. Even though there were so many decades between them, she didn't think of Llyr as a child but it was clear to her that Michael did. It was in the way that he stooped down to speak to him, using patronising smiles and shoulder pats. It was in his subtly exaggerated facial expressions and the story about the feather. The feathers were the same though, there was no denying that.

The people who truly believed in Tad Carreg had the same seriousness, they took everything too far, even things like play and rejoicing. These had always been sold to Blodwyn as the most fun ways of appreciating and worshipping Tad Carreg, but there was always order and rules. Somehow, Blodwyn managed to strictly adhere to the wrong way of doing things. There was an element to faith that she just didn't get. It was like a knowledge that others just possessed without any work in acquiring it. Worst of all, there were countless things people just accepted without ever having to question, such as that when you dropped something, it hit the floor and if you sat in water, you got wet. There were ways of testing those facts. But it seemed to Blodwyn that tests of faith were always unnecessarily cruel and when presented with people who claimed to know more, she felt she ought to listen before she raised a hand. This sat like a tiny knot in her throat. She could swallow and it would go

away but it would soon rise up again and it brought words up. They ordered themselves as follows, if they care so much about birds, and birds live in trees, then why destroy thousands of homes? The questions were soon quashed by the horizon and her missing feet.

‘This is fortunate timing, you might say, auspicious,’ Michael offered, ensuring he looked overhead when he finished.

Llyr glanced up but saw nothing other than clouds and sky. He was still uncomfortable with the sheer enormity of it, which was much more pronounced on the beach, given that there was nothing in the open ocean to interrupt it. It didn’t take long for the boundary lines of everything other than the ship to blur, which appeared to him to be already afloat. Dizzy, he spun and reached out for something to lean on, falling straight through Blodwyn.

‘My dear, Llyr, are you alright?’ Michael asked.

‘He probably needs to sit down, he’ll be alright,’ Blodwyn replied, wishing it was her hand – and not someone Michael clicked his fingers at – helping Llyr up.

Two men helped him. As soon as he was below deck, Llyr shoved the hands. They invited him into a small room off from the cargo hold. Blodwyn couldn’t bring herself to meet their eyes as she followed Llyr in. They bent around the doorway in an attempt for some kind of acknowledgement from her. Blodwyn turned to them and shrugged. They retreated, smiling like shy children. Although these people regarded her differently to many she had met, there was still something about their stares that made her non-existent skin crawl. It was their fascination with her that bordered on the perverse. She wanted to remind them that they would be like her one day. But she could only imagine that they would erupt into glee at the prospect.

Michael appeared in their wake and lit a candle in the room. He placed a jug of water on the floor next to Llyr. It had barely touched the boards before he snatched it up to his mouth and drained the contents. Michael placed a bowl of fruit and bread on the box next to the bed and Blodwyn watched Michael wince at Llyr as he put the jug back down and wiped at the sizeable waterfall streaming down his chin.

‘I think you’ll be comfortable in here,’ Michael said. ‘My quarters are much the same. You should rest, no doubt your journey has been long and you probably have much to think about.’ He paused. ‘Just send any doubts upward, always remember, the wind can carry infinite words.’

The knot tightened in Blodwyn’s throat. She swallowed. It sank down then rose back up and swelled to twice its previous size.

‘Why do you think we have got a lot to think about?’ She asked.

Michael filled the doorway. He bobbed his head left and right with an upturned mouth and mimed weighing items with his hands.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ he started and put his hands behind his back, ‘I don’t want to throw the word “convert” at you just yet but we’re excited to have you with us. You could have chosen to leave. You could have ignored the signs. But I can tell you that those that do, well, the least said about them the better. I threw some large concepts at you. I can tell you’re accepting of them though, who wouldn’t be? Afterall, you’re clever people. You wouldn’t have made it this far if you weren’t.’

Michael helped himself to one of the berries in Llyr’s bowl. He produced a small cloth from a concealed pocket and dabbed his lips. Llyr and Blodwyn hadn’t taken their eyes away from him but still, neither could say where he kept the cloth. He adjusted his belt and turned to leave.

‘You’ll be quite comfortable, I assure you. I’m excited for your respective journeys. You’ve made it this far together, but there are some things you can only experience alone. Though we’re never truly alone. There is always Themme.’ He swiftly turned back and, reaching down, rubbed Llyr’s pendant. ‘There, better.’ He nodded at the pair and then at the bed before he left.

On the bed was a neatly folded brand-new grey robe.

Llyr woke to a heavy scraping sound. The candle fell onto its side and miraculously didn’t extinguish. The fruit bowl rocked straight past it and onto the floor. He fought through the earthquake and stood the candle up again. As he set it back into the stand, the flame went out.

‘What... what’s happening?’ he called out. ‘Blodwyn?’

Blodwyn came through the ceiling. ‘They’re launching, come and see.’

There were people working ropes on the deck. He couldn’t see the people pushing the ship, but he could hear them. Grunts permeated enthusiastic shouting and goading. There was a great deal of splashing, as though an enormous creature was thrashing around in the shallows with all its might. One word seemed to echo above all others, ‘go.’ Sometimes it was alone, but the noise rose to a crescendo with the word being repeated.

‘GO, GO, GO, GO, GO!’

Llyr thought back to the word used the night before, auspicious. It was impossible for him to ignore the symmetry between his and Blodwyn’s *Go* and the launch. He caught himself thinking that, it was meant to be and before he realised it, he gripped the pendant.

The carved image lacked detail, but Llyr mentally sketched his feather onto one wing and Michael's feather onto the other.

'Early start. We had to go with the tide, and the wind,' Michael shouted, though Llyr couldn't see him.

The scraping faded away and was replaced by a lapping of water. Shouting gave way to cheering. The water sounded like waves crashing on a solitary rock. The ship quivered as the sails filled with wind. Someone, shouted instructions for the crew and they dutifully obeyed. Sails were hoisted and the rudder was dropped. The ship changed. It was no longer an ordered collection of dead wood, but a living being. It swam. Determination ran through every beam.

Blodwyn imagined that had the trees known that they might one day be part of a ship, then they may have voluntarily fallen. This second life had a different purpose. Had they known their brutal severance from their home resulted in an exploration other trees could only dream of, would they meet the axe as a friend? For the briefest instance, the sound of the boat smashing through a wave was all too similar to rustling leaves. Blodwyn liked the image which followed, branches overhead bursting with leaves and life. It was shattered by the commands continuing from above. Hoist this, pull that, hard to starboard. A voice high above everyone else called out, 'All clear! All clear!'

A woman rushed past Llyr and heaved on a thin rope. He was convinced that if he put his hands on a rope then he would be trapped again, but as he watched this woman pull with such purpose, he realised it was unlike anything he'd seen in Stac. Working efforts in Stac were wrenched through a lack of choice. On the ship the crew had chosen, he assumed, to get the wooden beast going. Was this their faith, he thought? The woman tied off her rope and craned her neck back to survey her work. Llyr joined in and saw a flag emblazoned with the

bird image from the pendants, only enormous and full of colour. Its wings flapped in the wind.

The crew settled down and before long the wind and the ship were doing most of the work as the second life of trees settled into a cruise.

‘Llyr, you haven’t changed into your robe. It’ll be much more comfortable than that,’ Michael sidled up alongside Llyr and placed a hand on his shoulder. He pinched one of the rough threads and let out a barely audible tut.

‘I didn’t know I needed one,’ Llyr replied. Blodwyn shrugged.

‘Oh yes, there’s one in your quarters,’ Michael replied. ‘There’s also a bucket of water in there, not for drinking mind you. I trust you like the ship, how are you finding sailing? I suppose it is a bit early to ask that really. But then, I am nothing if not,’ he paused, ‘curious.’

‘I like it. Is it always this bouncy?’ Blodwyn replied.

‘It can be much more so,’ Michael replied, smiling. ‘Anyway, enjoy the voyage and the views. I don’t suppose you’ll see much until daylight. Maybe you’ll want to sleep again, change into that robe, and use the bucket,’ Michael patted Llyr on the back.

‘Any idea how long this will take?’ Blodwyn asked.

‘The voyage?’ Michael replied without breaking his gait.

‘Yes.’

‘Honestly, no idea but I would have thought that you’d want it to last, no? If the prevailing theories are correct,’ Michael answered with a look of genuine concern on his face.

‘I think it’s about balance,’ Blodwyn lied.

Michael nodded and headed to his quarters.

Blodwyn was keen to see what lay ahead. She'd begun to toy with an idea, which she turned over and over in her head. Each time she was more taken with it. If she had a choice, what would she choose? Obviously, she couldn't reverse the process, but she may be able to choose a place. The Wall Man didn't have a choice, that much was clear and so the feeling of being trapped, whenever the seconds of self-awareness arrived, must have been torture. The same went for the forest of apparitions outside the slate ring. They probably chose where to stand, where to moor themselves but they were forced out. At least they were outside. Rhian roamed. That seemed like the answer, until it wasn't. Until you couldn't answer anymore and you were a howling fog. Or worse. The process was different for everyone, she knew that. However, she'd seen and been through enough to guess where she was heading – emptiness, an impression of pain, a shadow of a feeling.

Nevertheless, the question kept popping up – If I had a choice, what would I choose? She could, she reasoned, haunt a specific place. She could bond herself to something and go out on her own terms, perhaps terrify others from coming near a specific spot. She was unclear when she would adopt the ability to make others feel her feelings. Then of course, the end would come, or she would dwindle into a whisp and rush about forevermore. For some reason she didn't like that option. While *Go* had an appeal it was a conscious decision, as a whisp, that autonomy was gone. If even just one day meant something then the rest would too, by definition. She'd have to talk to Llyr about it, even if he couldn't understand.

Llyr tried on his robe. It was baggy and nearly reached the floor.

'If you're not careful you'll trip over that,' Blodwyn said.

'You're just jealous of my feet.'

Blodwyn smiled open mouthed at his boldness.

‘How is it?’ Llyr asked in a low voice.

Blodwyn hadn’t checked for a little while. Something in Llyr’s voice gained her trust. He might not understand yet, but one day it was going to happen to him. People spend their whole lives thinking certain things might happen and they never do, but this would, eventually.

She lifted up her skirt and kept rolling it in her hands. To her horror her left leg, all the way up above her knee, had gone. She tried to remember when she’d last seen it in full. Her right foot followed close behind. Llyr nodded at Blodwyn, in acknowledgment that he’d seen. She lowered the skirt again and examined her hands. The right palm, ring and little fingers were faint. At first, it was difficult to notice, but when she held it close to her other hand the contrast was clear.

‘It’s happening faster than I thought it would,’ Blodwyn said.

Llyr cleared his throat, ‘I want to say, “don’t worry” or “it’ll be alright” but they feel a bit, I don’t know, insulting somehow. I just want you to know that I’m with you. You know? It’s different for everyone, some are faster than others, I guess.’

‘It’s not insulting,’ Blodwyn tried to smile, ‘really, it isn’t. I understand why you’d want to say that and honestly it is more than most would say. I reckon.’

‘Oh definitely,’ Llyr agreed. ‘But, obviously... it is your choice, obviously... But, don’t you want to slow down, delay, put it off?’

‘Honestly?’

‘As honest as possible please,’ Llyr smiled and sat down. Blodwyn sat next to him and their shared gaze fell on her hands. Blodwyn put hers through Llyr’s and she told herself

that his hand felt smooth and the hairs on the back tickled her own. He turned it up so his palm faced the ceiling and she reciprocated.

‘I want, I *need* to keep going. For now.’

Llyr nodded.

‘I’ll let you know if there’s a change.’

The ship creaked and Llyr thought he saw Blodwyn’s eyes glaze over. In that moment, it was as though everything that she was, that made her *her*, briefly disappeared. He considered waving a hand in front of her eyes but that would have been too rude. He simply waited. They soon came back into focus again and she shook her head.

*

The morning brought with it the sound of song and every available tongue joined in above deck. The bass section, comprising just one voice, was powerful enough to rouse Llyr from sleep. He couldn’t make out the words, but the booming rhythm overhead seemed to be in time with the rocking of the sea. Blodwyn lay on the floor next to Llyr’s bed. She stared blankly at the ceiling. Llyr wondered if she was imitating sleep. He sat up, cleared his throat and performed an exaggerated yawn and stretch. Blodwyn’s gaze remained unbroken.

‘Morning,’ she said flatly.

‘Bore da,’ Llyr replied.

The blank look was still there but it was as though she was fighting it somehow. Her eyes widened, she shook her head and the empty stare receded, allowing concentration to flash back over her face like a shooting star. A smile crept across her face and Llyr returned the gesture.

‘We’re about to pass land,’ she said.

‘How do you know?’

‘Just heard them, above. They spotted it. It is why they’re singing, *hail the day and praise the way*. Or something.’

Moments before they came out on the deck, the singing stopped. Most of the crew stood on the starboard side of the ship. A single large block stuck out of the ocean. Up on the bridge Michael eyed the island through a pair of binoculars. He passed them to the man standing next to him who viewed the island then nodded at Michael. Both frowned. Michael whispered some instructions to the woman at the wheel.

Blodwyn floated up to them. The crew marvelled at her ascent for a moment before turning back to face the island. A few stayed focussed on Blodwyn.

‘What is it?’ Blodwyn asked Michael. She sounded angry and had to question that briefly before telling herself that their frowns meant they clearly knew something that they weren’t willing to share. The man next to Michael looked up at him but Michael respond in kind. He regarded Blodwyn before he turned his attention back to the island.

‘The Isle of Teeth,’ he said.

‘Why-’ Blodwyn started.

‘Because it is the island that bites.’

Blodwyn considered this for a moment. The other ship. ‘And you are going to bite back?’

‘You needn’t worry yourself about that,’ Michael said. He spoke directly to the short man by his side, ‘I’ll be in my quarters.’

Gliding over the water, Llyr couldn't believe how smooth the ship was in comparison to the launch. Most of the crew sat on the deck talking and some basked in the sun. For something that appeared to be serious and important there were clear opportunities for relaxation. Llyr peered over the starboard side of the ship where the Isle of Teeth stared at him. It didn't look like any teeth he'd ever seen. Part of him expected it to have its own Stac, but he couldn't see one. He figured that he was too far away.

The water was calm. Waves which seemed incessant at the beach had completely disappeared and all was still. Llyr was impressed by the strength of blue. Before the launch, the sea stretched out to infinity as did the sky. He didn't want to consider the sky in that moment. It was important, he thought, to enjoy a victory when it came before attempting to conquer anything else. The Isle of Teeth wasn't too far away and between him and it was a tameable sea. Besides, he could just stay close to the ship.

He took a spare coil of rope and tied it around a handrail. Some of the crew nudged each other, watching with interest. Llyr guessed the rope would easily be long enough. He tied it around his ankle and peered over the side. There was a slight wash from the ship curling up around the hull like a white cuff.

'What are you doing?' Blodwyn laughed.

'To be honest, I have no idea, hence the rope.'

He placed a hand gently down on the handrail and vaulted over the side.

Most of the crew and Blodwyn rushed to the side. Llyr was flailing at the surface, barely keeping his head above water. The salt water burned his eyes but the taste was worse. A few of the crew above him were moving their arms as though in flight. He couldn't tell if this was mocking or not. He felt as though he was fighting to stand and hadn't expected it to be so deep. The crew continued to shout encouragement. His legs found a rhythm and he

braved dunking his head under the surface. Far beneath him and the ship, the blue faded into black. He threw his head back out above the surface. There was an almighty splash next to him.

‘Kick, kick, kick. Kick but kick down,’ one of the crew said.

Llyr obeyed. The drag from the rope around his ankle made his kicks unbalanced.

‘These,’ the crew member in front of him in the water held his arms high above his head, ‘they’re just for steering. The bulk of the work is done by the legs. See.’

He spun around in front of Llyr before disappearing beneath the surface. Llyr felt the rope being removed from his ankle. He kicked more freely. The crew member splashed up above the surface again and laughed. He swam a little way away from Llyr and the ship.

‘You’re getting it, that’s better.’

‘Why would you jump in if you can’t swim?’ a voice called from above.

‘He likes the water,’ Blodwyn replied.

The ship drew ahead of the swimmers. The crew member in the sea helped Llyr to the rope. He grabbed the end and handed it to Llyr. He was hauled up onto the deck and landed with a slap. Llyr fought for his breath. His heart pounded and threatened to jump out of his chest.

‘Fun?’ Blodwyn fought to be heard over the crew’s laughter.

‘Amazing,’ Llyr replied.

Through his bony chest, Blodwyn could see how hard Llyr’s heart was working. Noticing her staring, Llyr invited her closer. She approached and slowly put her hand through

his ribcage and around the heart, closing her eyes. The force of its effort echoed through her palm.

It was never comfortable for Llyr to have Blodwyn inside of him. It felt like a winter breeze blew between his organs. The urge to twist away from the irritation was overwhelming, but something in Blodwyn's eyes told him that she needed to feel it. He couldn't help but wonder for how much longer she'd even have hands? She drew her hand out of him and he shuddered as it left.

'Sorry,' Blodwyn said quietly.

'Don't be, it's alright,' Llyr replied and he hurriedly put on his robe. 'Sorry, but it's bloody freezing in there. The water I mean.'

'Thought as much. And... thank you.'

A coarse towel landed between them.

'You should dry off before you dress really. Up to you of course but it'll probably be more comfortable than just putting the robe on. Also, in case you go back in.'

It was the same crew member that was in the water with Llyr. He dropped an apple onto Llyr's towel.

'Luke,' he said and smiled. 'If you fancy another dip then we can go in, but I think the sea is going to get rough again soon. So, sooner rather than later.'

'Do you mind?' Llyr asked Blodwyn.

'Of course not, I'm not your keeper,' she laughed. 'You enjoy. I'm going to see if I can have a chat with Michael.'

‘Oh,’ Luke started, ‘he tends to like his privacy. Doesn’t really like being disturbed. If he doesn’t answer when you knock then just leave it.’

‘I can’t,’ Blodwyn replied.

Blodwyn drifted up to the bridge. Towards the rear was a small wooden hut. She neared the door and placed her lips through it.

‘Michael,’ she called.

‘Come in,’ came the muffled reply.

Inside, Michael sat at a desk. Blodwyn didn’t know what she’d expected but she’d assumed that it would be more opulent than the other rooms. However, it was in keeping with the rest of the ship and indeed like Llyr’s room, containing a simple box bed with the same kind of mattress as Llyr’s, the same jug of water and bowl of fruit. The only noticeable difference was the desk, which was made from a darker wood than the ship and the surface was covered with papers. Some had writing on that Blodwyn couldn’t read, whilst others had curious sketches on – outlines of land masses with drawings of birds and feathers at the corners. Michael was busily working on one of the maps.

‘I knew you’d come eventually,’ Michael said, without looking up from the desk. ‘What is troubling you? Besides the obvious.’

‘The obvious?’ Blodwyn replied.

‘Are you sure about that,’ he turned to face her and though she was standing and he was sitting he still managed to look down his nose at her. ‘There’s... something there.’

‘Not really.’

‘No no, we simply cannot discuss that until you tell me what is really bothering you. Even though we both know.’

Blodwyn was taken aback. Michael’s room was dark despite the candlelight. She could hardly see her own hands and the objects in the desk flickered. Michael lit another candle and invited Blodwyn to sit on his bed. On the bedside box was a book emblazoned with the same bird symbol as the pendants. The words, *Veracity of Aire* were printed along the top. She sat down close to the book and wondered what the words meant.

‘Now, I can hear you,’ Michael said, producing a wooden egg from somewhere in his robe and placing it between them. Blodwyn made a note to watch his hands carefully in future. ‘Normally, I wouldn’t explain, you understand? I do this with people who are already familiar with our practises.’

He opened the top of the egg. It was empty.

‘We can speak in confidence and the egg will contain our conversation. It will then be up to you what you do with it. Either you can nurture those concerns and they will grow and hatch into something toxic, an obsession, an ill will or a self-destructive behaviour.’

Blodwyn listened. At first, she thought that, nearly everything that came out of his mouth was ridiculous and wondered why she was there. Curiosity pecked away at that thought and replaced it with compliance. If nothing else, she stayed to see what would happen. But there was always a chance that it would work. She briefly felt stupid for allowing herself to think that. The wooden egg yawned up at her.

Michael continued, ‘or, you can leave the egg with me. I will carry this conversation with me as I carry so many others.’ He opened a low drawer in his desk, which was full of identical eggs. ‘I know what you’re thinking,’ he sighed. ‘I destroy them. I take the concerns away.’

Silence ensued, until, breaking it, Blodwyn mumbled, 'I see.'

'Now, what is bothering you?' Michael frowned.

The ship groaned. Blodwyn imagined that it woke, as if from a doze and listened in. The small room huddled ever tighter around the pair.

'I'm just going to come out and say it. Given you're so good at figuring things out,' she continued, but with full sincerity. 'Was that true, what you said to Llyr about your feather? Was it even remotely real?'

Without taking his eyes off Blodwyn, Michael unfastened one of the kite feathers across his shoulders and twirled it in his fingers. He hummed and it sounded similar to the song the crew sang that morning.

'Real enough. As real as it needs to be,' he paused and stopped twisted the feather. Instead, he ran a finger along its length, he kept doing it. Up and down. 'As real... as you.'

Blodwyn shot a look down at her feet which were still not there. Worse than that, she thought, Michael doubtless caught the look. The questioning knot in her throat sank down to her stomach where it twisted around, tying anger and confusion together.

'John, one of the crew up there, you may have heard him singing earlier. He's got one hell of a bass,' Michael kept caressing the feather in his hands.

As real as you, echoed through Blodwyn's whole being.

'One day we were singing one of our songs to an elderly woman. She lived in the absolute middle of nowhere. All alone. All she ever wanted her whole life was company. We sang for her. Well, I didn't of course, I can't carry a tune. Anyway, this woman. She was deaf. Stone deaf. Couldn't hear the birds singing in the trees around her little hovel. She wasn't willing to help or hear us out or anything. I guess, as best as one can, that she'd

retreated from people due to being unable to hear them. So, we were there singing and it's about time in the song for John to come in. And he really came in. He must have had a good sleep and some honey because he really boomed. Do you know what the little old lady did?' Michael stopped playing with the feather.

'No, of course not.'

Despite not knowing him, Blodwyn hated Michael's pauses. Those little moments of silence. She knew exactly what he was trying to do – lend some suspense to whatever he was saying. Worst of all, it worked. She waved at him to continue and of course, he didn't speak right away. He didn't even consider his words. Not outwardly anyway. His expression and gaze didn't change. It was like he was frozen, enjoying the silence between breaths.

'She cried. Just a few tears at first but then they wouldn't stop. She couldn't hear but she hadn't reckoned on his voice. Those rich, deep bass notes shook her whole body not just her ears.'

'Fair enough,' Blodwyn said, confused.

'She told us afterwards, that was the first thing she'd heard in decades.'

'What's your point?' Blodwyn asked, feeling the knot of anger easing a little.

'My point is, she couldn't hear and she didn't hear but to her John's voice was real. Sound, *is* real. Everything goes through the air you see, that's how it is all connected.' Michael twisted the feather and as swiftly as he removed it, he replaced it.

'So-' Blodwyn started.

'It has already started, the process, we call it – airing. You're becoming one with the air we breathe, it is the ocean that all birds swim on and it will be another piece of uplift

under Their wings. You see, you think you're here. For all intents and purposes, you are. But truthfully, you're not. You've already gone. I admire your willingness to submit to it.'

'There is no choice then?' Blodwyn said.

'There is always a choice. For you that choice is, where, not when.'

'So, what about people who get sort of stuck to something, an item or a place?'

Blodwyn asked.

'Echoes. You must never think that there is anything in these places. At least, nothing that can hurt you or truly commune with. That is not Their way. No. Just an echo. Sound will bounce around but it stops bouncing, eventually.'

Blodwyn nodded and rose.

Michael snapped the egg shut and threw it into the drawer.

LIGHT

The rising sun bled through the ocean like melted wax. At first glance, the rock appeared much taller than anything they'd seen before and although it wasn't as wide as the Isle of Teeth, columns and sea stacks reached high above the waves. Llyr wondered if they were bound for another mountain, inching closer, he convinced himself that he couldn't climb it. But as they neared, he realised that the shapes standing tall above sea level weren't geological marvels. The protrusions were manmade straight lines – towers littered with lights. A constant radiance emanated from them, nothing like the flickering light that Llyr and Blodwyn had known in Stac. Somehow, notwithstanding the distance, Llyr thought the lights seemed cold.

As the ship crawled closer, the buildings gained definition. At first, their height made Llyr think of Stac. However, there was nothing Stac-like about their polished exteriors and shimmering surfaces. The towers were laid on a grid with straight paths running between them and it seemed that these structures occupied all visible space on the island apart from a thin strip of beach, illuminated by the cold light. Some buildings hung over cliff edges and expanded outwards, propped up by enormous poles. Llyr's gaze kept returning to the beach. The ragged strip was the only thing which wasn't angular; the sole organic thing he saw. He was drawn by the rhythm of infinite waves rolling onto the shore.

A deep rumble, emanating from the starboard side, shook the ship. Llyr and a few of the crew shot over to the side and leaned over the edge. The ship had run into a giant cable which ran upwards, out of the sea and towards the island. As they followed it, they noticed several other lines, which drew together, closer and closer, toward a specific building. The crew fought to free the ship from the cable, but they realised, that to run away from one meant getting caught in another. The building into which the cables fed was unlike any of the

others. It was mostly dark, having fewer lights and it was much shorter, like a squat box. The side facing out to sea had just one light, a large window, below which was a neat mouth which the lines fed into like spaghetti.

‘What, what do we do?’ a crew member called out.

All the faces looked to Michael on the bridge. He wasn’t even facing the island, instead looking out to sea.

‘Simple, man the oars, hard to port. We need an about turn, otherwise we’ll take on damage. We’ll drop those that wish to disembark in one of the lifeboats.’

‘I volunteer,’ called a voice.

‘And me,’ called Luke.

They were joined by three other voices who rushed towards the stern. The rest of the crew descended below decks and Llyr and Blodwyn marvelled as several spiky wooden limbs shot out from the side of the ship and began to dig into the water. The ship groaned as it turned, crashing into another cable. Llyr shuddered when it slid underneath the ship and threatened to capsize it.

Something about the building facing them bothered Blodwyn. Her eyes kept falling onto the mouth and its perpetual metal meal. There was no reason for her to be afraid, she told herself, just because it was an unknown. All the same, she felt that something in the building saw her. It was specific to her and not anyone else on the ship. She tried to shake irrationality from her head and hoped that more of her limbs wouldn’t leave with it.

‘Llyr,’ Michael called. ‘Are you volunteering?’

‘For what?’ Llyr asked, already knowing the answer.

‘To disembark,’ Michael looked down at Llyr and held his gaze, ‘it makes sense that you’d go where the kite flies.’

‘Kites, here?’ Llyr asked in disbelief.

‘Yes, I can show you their flight paths on one of my maps if you like. I’m pretty sure of it, but you may miss the boat altogether.’

Llyr looked to Blodwyn. She attempted a subtle disapproving glare and even mouthed, ‘no.’ It was impossible to know if Michael had noticed. The ship kept bashing into the cable and dragging alongside it. Llyr peered over the edge. He wasn’t sure, but a flash of light passed beneath them as the ship became disentangled from the cable.

‘We wouldn’t leave you here forever, just temporarily, spread the word, then we’ll pick you up again. You can clear the way for us here. There are other islands for us to see.’

‘Ok, but why aren’t you coming?’ Llyr asked. He sounded more accusatory than he intended.

‘I have other work to address, for my sins. I am excited that we are here, truly I am. But my role is not to speak.’

‘You spoke to me.’

‘You, Llyr, are special. Besides, I help others find their voice and don’t you want to use yours Llyr?’ Michael smiled.

From the deck, several feet below, Llyr noted how Michael’s smile was concentrated just on his mouth whereas his eyes, forehead and even his cheeks suggested something else. Llyr didn’t know what that was, but he imagined punching Michael. Every voice of authority he’d ever known always had the answers. From Capel to the Rope Chamber there was a plaster for every sore. The faces and tongues controlling those voices were out of reach. He

could only imagine the speaker in the Rope Chamber, every day for year upon wasted year. In contrast, Michael stood over him with hollow eyes and for the first time he had the power to do something.

The volunteers helped Llyr, with some firm persuasion, into the lifeboat. They placed him on top of a box at the stern and Blodwyn silently followed unable to take her eyes off the building. Michael nodded at Blodwyn and mouthed, 'we'll be back for you.' She had no reason to believe him. She told herself that all she'd wanted was the transport and if this is where the ship left her, she had to be at peace with that.

'What's in this?' Llyr asked, tapping the box as the boat descended into the water.

'Survival tools, a few rations, books and some robes. Just in case,' Luke replied.

The boat rode the waves like a twig in a stream. The volunteers sang to their brothers and sisters on the ship until their voices no longer reached each other. Llyr sat at the bow and watched as the island inched closer. The beach was empty and despite several attempts, he couldn't count the number of cables which led into the squat building. They passed over a several lights under the surface. Llyr was curious about them, but unnerved by their depth. Something was down there; he knew that much.

Blodwyn wondered if she could float above the water and back towards the ship. Having never travelled over water before she wasn't sure what would happen. She had seen Llyr struggle to swim and Rhian's story of her first death echoed in her head. What would become of her if she were to go under the surface? She tried to put it out of her mind.

A spotlight shone down on the lifeboat and froze in place. The crew stopped rowing.

'Rescue?' a voice boomed.

‘No. The rescue is ours to make,’ Luke shouted back and he was patted by some of the crew.

There was no reply, so the men set about rowing once more. The spotlight followed the crew as they continued towards the shore. Blodwyn watched as fish swam out of reach of the spotlight. The seabed rose up from the darkness as the lifeboat entered the shallows.

They hauled the lifeboat out of the water and clear up the beach. The sand had fewer stones and shells than the beach they had departed from. Llyr picked up a handful of it and let it pass through his fingers. The cables over his head converged in the mouth of the building and in the quiet breaths between waves they creaked in the wind. He couldn’t shake the image of the Rope Chamber and wondered if there was a crew of people, working but oblivious to what happened on the other side. Though they let out deep groans emanating from somewhere along the length, the cables were motionless.

‘Hold it. Stay right there.’

The voice came at the same time as a beam of blue light which surrounded Blodwyn. She screamed. Her howls echoed off the sheer cliff face and right back into the faces of the volunteers. Llyr instinctively reached out for her, but his hand passed through the light and through Blodwyn. She fell to her knees and kept screaming.

‘Make it stop!’ Llyr cried.

Blodwyn flickered like a flag in the wind. Llyr followed the light. The source descended a narrow staircase cut in a fissure at the edge of the beach. It emerged onto the sand with two people flanking either side. Their dark blue uniforms were crisp as though freshly pressed. A man in the centre was holding a small torch, pointed at Blodwyn. Llyr expected them to be angry, confused or at least curious. However, except for the man with

the torch, the men stood motionless. He tinkered with the beam and the light around Blodwyn dimmed. The flickering stopped and she stood up.

Like a frightened animal Blodwyn tried to run out of the light. The Runes in Stac had been painful, but this was entirely different. The pain was excruciating; it felt like being squeezed between two rocks. To her horror, the compression eroded her legs. She willed the missing pieces of shin and calf back into existence, but knew they couldn't return. Any second she expected the next flicker to be her last. With a faint hiss, barely audible over her screams, another inch fizzled away and the light around her brightened.

‘What is the meaning of this? We come peacefully,’ Luke stated.

‘Peacefully? Why were you tampering with our power?’ It was difficult to tell who spoke from the darkness behind the torch.

‘Power?’

‘I have to assume it is one of the following: jealousy from not having such pleasures yourself, vengeance for some perceived historical slight, or ignorance. You weren't to know because you are too simple, too foolish to understand otherwise.’

The torch pulsed, forcing Blodwyn to the floor again. She tried her best to stifle her scream. When she was able to stand again, she glared at the man holding the glowing item. She imagined herself stepping into his body and biting into his heart.

‘We are not ignorant. Truthfully, we didn't know the purpose of your sea structure but our mission here is to preach. To tell you of the virtues-’ Luke started but was interrupted by Llyr.

‘We're just ignorant, we didn't know what to expect or what is going on or anything. Please, just let my, let Blodwyn go. Please let her go.’

Llyr again expected something more from the faces, like laughter or shock, but still there was nothing. He thought about lunging forward and reaching for the torch, as he reckoned there was at least a chance that he could get a hand to it. He could only assume that their retribution would be brutal from those flanking the torch. Besides, he had no idea how to use it, but he wanted to break it and would smash it against his own body if he could. He took a tentative step closer to them.

‘We cannot do that.’

‘Please, this is Llyr, he is our most recent convert, along with Blodwyn there. I am Luke. We are here to preach. Please stop hurting our sister. I could begin now if you like? You see, mostly, once people have heard the truths they tend to-’ Luke held his hands up in surrender.

‘This is the truth. You come here uninvited. You attempt to damage our infrastructure with your primitive device. Then you speak of faith and belief. Worst of all, you bring one of *them* here. You must understand the difficulty I face in believing you.’

‘I do, I do,’ Luke began. ‘This, it seems, is a crisis of faith. Let us begin with-’

‘Stop,’ another voice called from behind the light.

Footsteps approached across the sand. The speaker emerged out into the light from behind the welcoming party. It was a tall woman with her hair pulled back into a taut bun. She kept her gaze firmly on Blodwyn as she spoke.

‘We picked up their ship a little while ago. They haven’t caused any damage. Obviously. However, I must inform you that we do not allow people to just turn up here and preach. Especially not when you bring one of *them*,’ she nodded at Blodwyn. ‘But don’t worry, we’ll deal with that.’

‘Whatever you do to her, you can do to us,’ Luke said proudly, looking to the other volunteers, who confirmed the sentiment with solemn nods. ‘Are we the first visitors then?’ he added.

‘You’re sure?’ was the swift reply.

‘Of course. She is... What she is going through is the closest we can come to-’

Luke was interrupted as he was enveloped in his own blue light. Blodwyn felt a small and shameful pang of triumph as his screams were far louder than hers. The screams were soon followed by the rest of the volunteers. One by one they collapsed and were writhing on the floor in agony.

‘Wait, wait,’ Llyr started.

‘Ah someone sensible among you. Don’t you wish to preach? I’m wondering if that would be sensible right now.’

‘I’m not one of them, neither is she,’ Llyr pointed to Blodwyn.

‘You look like them, you’re all dressed the same. You arrived in the flotsam. Tell me, what am I supposed to think?’

Llyr considered her position and found himself in agreeance with her. Something in her eyes made him think that he had a chance if he kept talking. It wasn’t much, just a flash but it was enough to galvanise him to keep talking. He thought there may even be other things they could agree on, some kind of common ground. There were times for violence, he often wanted to take that option, but he couldn’t now. Rage bubbled up, but all too familiar suppression gulped it down.

‘I don’t care what you think. I’m not going to change your mind. Honest answer, I was told you had kites here. That’s it. I’m just here for them.’

‘Kites?’ the woman screwed her face up into a condescending smirk.

‘Yes, kites.’

Llyr carefully removed his feather and held it up. The woman glanced at the feather and Llyr in turn, watching as he slowly replaced it. She seemed oddly taken with the feather and despite trying to maintain eye contact with Llyr, her gaze kept shooting back towards it. He twisted it between his thumb and index finger.

‘Ok. Before I even bother with that. I want all of you to know that we have tracked your ship. It seems to have left you. The tides aren’t with it for a good while now, so you’re stuck. What exactly was your purpose here?’

‘Luke and his people really do want to just preach to you. Conversion I think they call it. But honestly, I’m just interested in birds. I study them, or I’d like to, and I track them and I have tracked them here,’ Llyr said.

‘Everyone’s truth is the ultimate truth, but it’s the person with the power who decides. That, unfortunately for you all, is me.’ She turned and addressed the team behind her, ‘all of them to holding. If they think *she* is divine then they can join her if they like.’ She turned to Llyr. ‘Leave this one. He’s primitive, but I think we’ll get the most sense from him.’ she approached Llyr and held her hand up to his face as though she was holding a glass. ‘Part of me,’ she whispered, ‘just wants to study you.’ She couldn’t keep his eyes fixed on him though – they kept falling on his feather.

Blodwyn was as silent as her captors when she and the volunteers were dragged away. Luke and the other volunteers broke into song. Try as they might, their captors couldn’t beat silence into the Wings.

‘Where are they going?’ Llyr asked.

*

Blodwyn woke suspended in a glass net that thrummed with a low, insistent buzz. Rows of at least thirty more stretched along the walls, most empty, but the volunteers were trapped in their own nets to her right, silent and still. The room was a blinding white, the harsh artificial light cut through Blodwyn. Even a fleeting glance at the ceiling sent a sting through her entire being. She looked like a sketch pressed against the light, fragile and insubstantial. And then she saw him – Luke, watching from an adjacent space, a slow, knowing smile playing across his face

‘I was wondering when you’d wake. How are you?’ he asked.

‘I’ve been better,’ Blodwyn replied. Her voice sounded hollow and faint.

From the top of Luke’s net, a faint clicking sound emerged, like a spider clapping out of sight. He screamed and fell into a heap, howling and gripping his head. The other volunteers called for it to stop, tearing at their nets and thrusting their limbs through the holes only for them to burn. The smell of singed flesh filled the room. Helplessly, Blodwyn watched, although she too tried to pass her hand through a hole in the net. An odd burning sensation shot through her hand and up her arm, losing potency at the shoulder.

‘You tried to sabotage the power.’

A short woman with dark hair tied in a pony tail approached and stood inches from Luke’s netting. She stared down her sharp nose at him. Luke stopped screaming, shaking his head and panting. The short woman shot a look at Blodwyn, then back to Luke. Blodwyn imagined what the torturer would look like in the net. She wanted to hear the ‘hiss’ of her flesh burning.

‘You tried to sabotage the power,’ she repeated, her lips barely moving.

‘The only power I know of is the one I serve,’ Luke said defiantly to an agreeing chorus from the other volunteers. They cheered. One of them broke into song but was shocked out of it. ‘Please, we mean no harm.’

‘You speak for these people?’ The torturer asked.

‘Not really, but I guarantee they’ll attest to anything I say.’

‘Very well,’ the torturer said, taking a few steps away from Luke and inching towards Beth, another volunteer, who stood next to him. She pinched a dial on a small round device in her hand and turned it. Writhing in her net, Beth called out in pain. The torturer twisted the dial around and then back but she gave no response to the shrieks.

‘Did you try to sabotage the power?’ her voice was quiet and small.

‘No,’ Luke hurried, ‘I don’t even know what this power is. There is only the power I serve.’

The singing started again. *For every feather on the wing, so every voice must duly sing.* The song willed Beth to her feet and her voice fought through gritted teeth. *Stand, stand and rejoice, stand, stand and rejoice, beyond your last breath, rejoice, rejoice.* The song got louder. The torturer, conducting, took a step back from the nets. *Lift every word and lighten the load on my feet on earth.*

‘So, you have said. But do you want to know the odd thing about that power, the one you serve?’ The torturer made no attempt to be heard over the song, her voice was approaching a whisper, forcing Luke to move closer despite the pain.

‘What,’ Luke said, biting.

‘I’m wondering how it compares.’ She made a swift turn of the dial in her hand.

Beth bellowed. She tore at the net and the stench of burning skin forced the torturer to take another step back. Beth held her head and screamed. Blodwyn knew what was coming.

A sudden silence cut through her pain.

Blodwyn watched as Beth left her body, remembering the feeling even through the filter of so many decades. It was like waking up well after a prolonged illness. Standing to defiant cheers, Beth examined her hands and smiled down at her former body, passing her hand through the face of her corpse. The eyes were closed but the mouth was distorted in a permanent silent scream. She was yet to discover the host of new symptoms, but Blodwyn knew there was plenty of time for that.

‘You have freed her from her flesh,’ Luke said.

‘So now what?’ the torturer asked taking up her post outside Luke’s net again.

‘Now she has begun her final journey. That is what you have done and that is what was meant to be, although we didn’t know it at the time. None of us know the when or the how we only know the why.’ The others muttered in agreeance.

‘You mean to say that-’

‘Your power is nothing. Nothing under Themme wings. This is where we all go. Even you, my friend.’ Luke smiled and it seemed sincere.

Blodwyn wanted to see the briefest hint of anger in Luke’s face. She calmed her fury at the blatant murder until it sat like a patient, well-trained hound. She tried to lean around and get a better look, but Luke settled back into his knowing happiness. Blodwyn had to respect that, even if only for a moment. His smug knowing annoyed her, but she could see the benefits. She wasn’t sure about Michael, but Luke believed and lived every word. Blodwyn couldn’t help but feel the injustice and she had to pat and placate the hound.

‘Nothing?’ the torturer looked disappointed but Blodwyn thought it was false.

‘She has started the final journey,’ Luke smiled.

Beth was trying to look around Luke to smile at Blodwyn. She returned the gesture.

‘I wonder where that ends,’ she replied.

With the push of a tiny button on the device in her hand Beth’s net tightened around her and pulsed with a bright white light, before shooting down through the floor and into the abyss below. An empty net dropped through the ceiling where hers had been.

*

Like a child following an adult, Llyr walked behind the tall woman, recognising only the staircase. As soon as they got to the top, a thin metal handrail led onto a street where wide paced roads wound between and around buildings and there wasn’t a single bush or tree in sight. With the sun rising, the streetlights dimmed, artificial giving way to natural light. Llyr didn’t know what he expected. A single kite perched somewhere? Or even woodland for them to nest in. He’d only ever seen birds flitting in and out of trees, so it made sense that a kite would behave in much the same way. He hadn’t expected somewhere so overwhelmingly grey and shiny. The street surfaces were like long perfectly smooth rocks and the buildings were made out of something similar. In the lean grey, he became aware of his own physicality in a way he had never felt before – he was filthy, his skin looked like he had done nothing but roll around in dirt. The tall woman’s uniform, or boots, he couldn’t tell which, squeaked as she walked.

The windows, which mostly faced inwards towards other buildings rather than out to sea, were strange. Llyr reasoned that if the nearest tall building really was like Stac then surely, you’d want the window to face outwards. The sea had to be more interesting than

other buildings. As they walked along the pavements, he saw a few people sitting at the windows. They drank from cups or ate and stared out at each other. They weren't waving, nor were they paying any attention to anything below or even glancing out at the beautiful blue expanse. Instead, they grimaced towards each other, or engage in verbal battles. But for what? An elderly man caught sight of Llyr – and regarded him for a moment before snapping back to his staring opponent across the street, a near identical elderly man. The people here were so similar to each other, Llyr thought, just variations on the same theme.

‘What is this place?’ Llyr asked aloud, though he didn't expect an answer.

‘This is home, the greatest place on Earth,’ the response was overly cheerful with a rehearsed happiness.

‘It doesn't *feel* like it somehow,’ Llyr muttered to himself.

They headed down another empty street. Though he couldn't see, Llyr had a feeling that the island continued in much the same way. Grid upon grey grid. A sea breeze blew through and consoled him, Llyr nodded, acknowledging that there was, at least, air. It was odd though, for people to not be out in it, or on the beach, or anywhere but inside staring at their neighbours. The looks of concern hadn't changed and anyone that noticed Llyr did so only for a moment. The silent competition rumbled on.

The woman turned on her heel, stopping Llyr in his tracks.

‘Tell me, truthfully, where did you crawl from?’

‘I... I honestly don't know,’ Llyr replied.

On some level he had known that this question would be aimed at him one day, but he had no idea how to answer it. The only response he had was that he'd come from Stac, but he already knew the word would mean nothing to this person. It was much the same, he thought,

with anyone outside Stac. He thought back to the hole again and the faces of those he left behind. They'd stood in the light for the first time and they had chosen darkness. The faces leering out of their windows here echoed those in the ruins of Capel. These islanders didn't have walls because they didn't need them.

'Where are we going?' he asked.

'Well, what use is telling you that if you don't even know where you've been?'

'I came from Stac,' Llyr replied and sighed, anticipating a confused response.

'Do you mean one of those stone tower things?'

'Yes,' Llyr replied quickly, 'how did you –'

'We used to get about you know. We don't just stay where we are. Well, we didn't. I'm led to believe that much of the world is like that now with towers. Primitive stone hovels.'

'How do you know all this? Have you been?'

'Of course I haven't.'

The pace quickened until they came to a building with a mural depicting a forest scene. It was the only colourful thing on the island, though time had muted its vibrance. Within the artwork, several creatures, most of whom Llyr had no name for, were paused in their activity, looking out at the street. There were foxes, badgers, sheep, goats and even a wolf. Above it all, flying in a concrete grey sky was a red kite.

'Is that a –'

'We believe so yes.'

'What do you –'

‘No one has seen any of those things for years, decades in most cases. They certainly don’t crawl out of the sea like you did. No one does that either. No one.’

Her curiosity glanced over him like a silk veil.

‘But I have,’ Llyr retorted, ‘I’ve seen nearly all of those things.’

‘Lucky you,’ the woman reached out and ran her fingertips over the image of a green bush. Llyr thought of his feather and how it felt when he tickled his palm.

‘You don’t believe me?’ Llyr asked.

‘Why should I?’

‘I haven’t lied to you yet, why would I start now?’

‘How am I supposed to believe that?’ She took her fingers off the wall, spinning round and staring down her nose at Llyr.

‘You believed enough to lead me here. On some level, you believed,’ he paused.

‘You’re curious, aren’t you? That’s ok. I am too. About a lot of things. I think that’s what led me here.’

Her expression changed to a subtle shock, worn with high eyebrows and parted lips. Since leaving Stac, Llyr had felt in the dark, adrift and confused as the world was revealed around him, meaning he was constantly playing catchup and falling further behind. In the face of this woman, he recognised some of that. It manifested itself as innocence and for only a split second he could clearly see what she would have looked like as a child. No doubt, she would have scratched at the edges of the walls just like he did.

‘Doesn’t matter. It is definitely a strange day. We’ve never had visitors before.’

‘Then why take me here?’

‘To see what would happen when you saw the kite. Tell me, is that really a kite feather?’

Holding the feather by the tip, Llyr pointed it at her, allowing her the opportunity to run her finger along the length. She shuddered and took a step back. He laughed and pointed it at the woman again. This time, she removed a small metal spike from a shirt pocket and ran that up and down a few times until she was brave enough to try her own finger again. But when she did, she shivered. When he saw her frown, Llyr’s laughter stopped.

‘Hey, what’s your name?’ Llyr asked.

‘Fir,’ she replied.

‘Nice to meet you, Fir.’

With her frown settling into a different shape, the confusion on Fir’s face was clear to see. Llyr thought he saw something in her though and had to wonder if this was how Michael, or even Bryn felt when looking upon him. You couldn’t put your finger on it, he thought, but there is something inside this person that resonates with me. He felt like their respective ignorance had made them both blind but he had been given an eye and hers were just opening.

‘Fir, have you ever wanted to leave?’

*

‘We’ve got to escape.’

Blodwyn tried to whisper to Luke but she found herself getting louder until it bordered on a shout. He was sat in the centre of his net, head bowed and Blodwyn wondered if he was asleep. Another volunteer had disappeared. Blodwyn couldn’t understand why she had been spared. She had seen enough hatred aimed at her to recognise it on sight and the islanders

took it to new levels, not a single soul could bring themselves to look at her for more than a second. The disgust on their faces was palpable. But surely, she thought, *it* happened here too? It had to. If so, what then? Self-hatred until they remove themselves from the gaze of others?

It was clear that Blodwyn held some importance to the Wings. Whatever that significance was, it was running out, and they hadn't long to get back to the boat. She wished she had a physical body. If she did, when they got to the lifeboat, she could help to row. Now Beth was gone, the remaining volunteers, plus Llyr, if he could be found, would have a hard job rowing.

Pausing only to smile or nod, Luke whispered to himself. Despite her inability to hear him, she guessed what he was doing given his posture and clasped hands. She wanted to scream at him, telling him how pointless his efforts were. Surely he'd been doing that for the entirety of their trip and look where it had got them. She could already hear his reply, which would doubtless be something about everything going according to plan.

'Luke, I know this is hard, but we need to try and focus.'

'Don't worry Blodwyn,' he didn't break his praying posture or even open his eyes, reciting, 'everything is in hand. Take comfort in love.'

The door opened and Llyr was led into the room by Fir.

'They are free to go,' she said.

'Llyr?' Blodwyn called.

'Blodwyn, it's alright. We can go.'

'Even me?' she said.

‘You can stay if you like, but I think you’d probably rather leave,’ Fir said, though she still couldn’t bring herself to look at Blodwyn for more than a stolen second.

Blodwyn’s net opened and she rushed out.

Glancing at her hands and seizing her opportunity to speak, she said, ‘It’ll happen to you too you know, one day.’ Her right hand was almost transparent, with the left not too far behind. She wondered what her face must look like. She threw her concern away and hoped, just for a moment, that she looked like an image from Fir’s nightmares. The lack of eye contact and the inability to stand facing her for more than a few seconds, Blodwyn liked to think that she did and made a mental note to check her reflection as soon as she could.

With a quiet click Luke’s net opened, shortly followed by his neighbours. They gingerly stepped out into the sterile freedom of the white room.

‘No hanging around, I’ll see you down to the beach and on your way,’ Fir said and pointed to a door.

‘You’re letting us go?’ Luke asked.

‘Don’t question it. Come on.’

Grabbing Llyr’s hand, Fir led the way out of the room, through an equally brightly lit hallway which led to a staircase. As they descended, they left the artificial light behind and stepped into the weak light of dawn as it was still early and the sun hadn’t fully risen. Llyr enjoyed Luke’s sigh and rubbed his eyes. The group lingered on the stairs for a moment. Llyr’s skin looked better than in the white room, where every imperfection, scab, mole or cut gained layers of detail that he didn’t appreciate. It was eerily reminiscent of the UV lights in Stac. Though he was still filthy, he admired the natural warmth in his skin. For Blodwyn it was different. Outside she was less transparent and more colourful than she had been before

but the damage was clear to see, so much so that Llyr had to squint to see her hands. He daren't look at her feet.

Passing through a room with a large rectangular window filled with a panoramic view of the sea, Blodwyn focussed on a single point towards the horizon. She watched as the barely visible crest of a wave curled over itself and was lost, allowing the vista to transport her to the view she had on the ship of this building. The window was so similar that, she thought, it had to be the same. From here, she could see the cables feeding out into the ocean underneath the window. A pang of terror thudded through her like a phantom heartbeat. She rushed over to the window and tried to count the cables.

‘Each one of them is a-’

‘Come on, there’s nothing for you in here,’ Fir tried to usher the rest of them towards the next set of stairs.

‘No,’ Llyr interjected, ‘what do you mean Blodwyn?’

Blodwyn could almost hear the screams which sounded just like her own. She traced the journey of each cable to the person trapped inside a net at the other end and was moved to imagine their visceral howls. Blodwyn wondered how close she had been to that descent, or how long those people had been down there. What state must they be in? Were they even people anymore? The control panel below the window displayed a series of lights and a few switches that even if she could operate, she couldn't understand. The intended function of each switch wasn't obvious. She may not have understood the method at work between the lights twinkling underwater and the corresponding cables, but she fully comprehended the result.

‘It’s the water pressure,’ Fir said, ‘that crushes... then the sound is what’s picked up and —’

Blodwyn scowled at Fir, lunging towards her, nearly making it inside before Fir reached for her torch. Locked in a staring stalemate, Blodwyn considered submitting, wondering whether she could have done something, anything, from beneath the surface. She thought of the countless fogs and gasses that roamed the halls of Stac. They were just an impression; a remnant of feeling that had no purpose or thought other than to phase in and out of existence, remembering a time of trauma or regret until they eventually disappeared. They were down there, trapped, re-living something they weren't even aware of anymore, with no possible route to dissipation. All so a few people could have sterile rooms, fancy lights and energy.

Llyr seethed. After all, that would be him one day, he thought. Despite everything they'd seen in Stac and outside. Nothing came close to that horror glowing on the seabed. None of the previous outcomes seemed great either but all were far better than being trapped and crushed out of existence. All they knew was suffering, and worse, that pain was power to someone else.

'You mean to say that –' Luke started.

'Don't say it. Just. Don't,' Blodwyn spoke through gritted teeth.

Luke took one last look at the control panel, nodding, seemingly to himself, before they left the room.

Luke, Llyr, Fir and the two remaining volunteers pushed the lifeboat towards the water, but Blodwyn couldn't take her eyes off the cables. She was surprised that Fir was helping, inspecting the boat, examining the oars and the box at the stern. She'd seen the look on Llyr's face enough times and likely he had seen it on hers. Fir was intrigued.

‘Stop,’ Luke said and they all stopped just as the boat kissed its first wave.

He opened the box, removing a couple of hatchets, handing them to volunteers and Llyr. Having never held one before, Llyr hadn’t expected it to be so heavy, but enjoyed the weight in his hand and swung it through the air a few times. Luke shot a look at Fir who raised her hands in defence.

‘I shan’t kill, I can’t. None of us can,’ he took a few steps closer to Fir, ‘but I can do everything up to that.’

Fir swallowed, closing her eyes. It was a look that Blodwyn recognised from when Llyr stood in the hole back in Stac, questioning whether he could make his descent. ‘I... I want to help. But I can’t. Don’t you all have... don’t you do...’

‘Just tell us how much warning we have,’ Llyr called. He bounded into the sea, hacking at the first cable he saw.

Each had chosen their closest cable and were attacking with all their might. Sparks flew as they took chunks out of their respective opponent. Llyr severed the first line and without waiting to see what would happen, rushed off to the next. He was closely followed by the others and within seconds each had a new length to cut.

‘Wait, what good will that do?’ Blodwyn asked.

‘The net won’t work anymore so without that —’ Fir was interrupted by a roar from beneath the waves.

A hideous shape, like a monkey puzzle tree made of smoke, writhed out of the water. It floated over the waves and towards the stairs. It seemed to turn for a moment, though it was impossible to know just which way it faced. It spun around then shot up the stairs.

‘The alarm has been raised,’ Fir said.

The next set of cables were cut and behind them lights in the building went out in quick succession. The alarm fell silent and was replaced with shouting and pleas for help. Blodwyn desperately hoped that one of them was the torturer. Several monstrous gasses and shapes emerged from the water, following each other towards the stairs, ignoring everyone on the beach. Some cables must have had more than one net attached, because it was hard for Blodwyn to keep count.

‘You don’t have long,’ Fir added.

Llyr and the others tossed their tools back into the box and ran the lifeboat back into the water. By now, the sun was fully up. Fir followed them a little way into the water, but she recoiled at the feeling of wet feet. The gap between the boat and Fir grew.

‘Get in,’ Llyr shouted, ‘come on.’

Blodwyn scowled at him. Fir was muttering, ‘I can’t, I can’t,’ to herself. She ran along the water’s edge, dipping in and out of the sea. Once, she braved a few steps further towards the boat and the water was up past her ankles. But she jumped back each time. The crew nearly capsized the boat when they jumped in. The rowing was frantic. After a few moments and some carefully-timed calls from Luke they got into a rhythm. Blodwyn was impressed with how quickly Llyr picked it up.

Blodwyn was the only one facing the shore, telling herself that the purpose was see whether they were followed. She watched Fir pace the water’s edge and she didn’t take her eyes off the beach as a series of guards descended the stairs. In the grip of a net, Fir fell.

‘Why bother? We didn’t do all of them,’ Blodwyn said.

‘It mattered...’ Luke spoke between strokes, ‘to that one.’

Luke nodded to a more humanoid shape which had passed out of the water moments before. It lunged at one of the guards and entered him. Another fired a net at it, missing and trapping his colleague. Bodies piled and twisted into each other on the beach. Between the chaos one voice rose above them all. Fir called for help.

GRIP

Rain breathed over the lifeboat. Ahead, the weather thickened into an impenetrable wall. Llyr and Luke took it in turns to perform half-hearted strokes. Llyr hoped that Michael's ship would appear. Even when nobody was rowing, it seemed to Llyr that the boat still moved ahead, so he silently pleaded with the sea to carry them to land. Instead, their boat bobbed through endless ocean and no matter which way they tried to steer, Llyr felt that they were headed for worse.

The sky darkened. Blodwyn willed the island behind them to sink under the waves. There was no question as to whether they'd done the right thing, but she wondered if it was worth boarding Michael's ship. Though she felt useless, she told herself to keep going. The rowing had taken its toll on the crew, who nibbled on sodden rations of bread and fruit. It rained right through Blodwyn and onto the wood. She was mesmerised by the countless tiny amalgamations in the meeting of raindrop and sea. The individual ceased and joined a larger whole. Some raindrops fell in a straight line right to the surface, whilst others, further ahead in the deepening storm, fell at an angle. It didn't matter. She'd seen enough of them to know that it didn't change how they splashed or what happened when they did. There was *something* in that moment, she thought, an instance where there is both raindrop and sea. She hoped that the raindrop knew, in some way, that although it was over as rain, it began anew as sea.

From the heavy weather, a grey-green island grew. The landmass seemed lifeless, with no visible structures or trees. At times it faded away behind dense bursts of rain. Between rogue waves, the crew got what little rest they could, Llyr slumped into a ball and slept.

*

The familiar stiffness with which he woke made Llyr believe that he was back in his twll. His sodden robe clung to him like a second skin. He stared directly overhead and the rain beat down on his face. He wondered why he'd bothered getting in the boat, he could just swim. The waves answered with a roar, threatening to throw the crew out of the lifeboat.

Taking up the oars, Llyr realised that it had been a while since he had used his upper body. Beaming through his exhaustion, at the apex of each stroke, he felt powerful. In contrast, Luke rowed with a lack of urgency. The rest of the crew attempted a group effort but it often fell to an individual. The rain washed the sweat out of Llyr's face and he discarded the robe. The lifeboat barely overcame the tide but Llyr rowed on and he managed a laugh under his breath between his strokes. He couldn't have guessed that so many years of Rope Chamber shifts was the ideal preparation for rowing.

Keeping a stern lookout at the land ahead, Blodwyn noted that this island was much larger than it initially appeared, although mostly flat. Apart from the southern end, which was hilly, with steep rises and a peak hidden by the roving rain, the green land mass was low lying. She wasn't sure what to make of the lack of structures, but it reassured her that if there had been anything like Stac, she would have been able to see it. If the island was empty, they wouldn't want to stay there. Luke would want to move on and find some people to sing to, or convert. Although she thought him somewhat infantile in his faith, she acknowledged that he could have easily given up his beliefs and begged for his life, which she supposed had a certain kind of bravery to it. If the occupant of each freed net could speak, they would likely thank him for his efforts. He had probably already added those to the tally of the converted.

The lifeboat edged towards the shore. Luke mostly communicated via nods and offering water and food to the others, but Llyr took little of either. He'd settled into a working rhythm and despite how tired he was, he'd convinced himself that he wouldn't stop until they

landed. As much as he had hated mindless menial activity before, his body relished it now. Every sinew and muscle thumped with purpose and a desire to give everyone on the boat the gift of survival.

In Stac, rope hauling was something you did until you were broken, then someone else took your place until they too were beyond repair, and so on. Having no family, Llyr had been led to believe that he was lucky to get what he had. On the sea, he was cleansed. his heart sang with each stroke and the rain and wind were welcomed by his skin. It wasn't a shower, or a wash, but something deeper that drenched his skin through to his muscles and bones. The only struggle that mattered was progress – inch by inch. He hadn't even thought of or checked on his feather. For all he cared, it could have fallen overboard. If it had, he would lament its loss, but in those hours all that mattered was rowing and riding the waves.

With a thud, the lifeboat made contact with a rock.

The dull, muted hump shoved the boat upwards before grinding down the other side. Only Llyr had been alert enough to choose their direction and now his oars hit more, smaller rocks, tilting the boat so violently that it threatened to capsize. Before it could come to rest again, a large wave lifted it and carried it clear onto the sand. Except for Llyr, whose hands had seized around the oars, everyone got out of the boat. Luke prized off his Bone-white knuckles and fingers, leaving Llyr convinced that his fingers had been broken. He stamped his agony down into some uncomfortable grunts and staggered off the boat, watching whilst the others dragged it further up the beach.

Machair stretched out before them. It was impossible to tell where it ended and the sea began. Only a few landmarks stood out on the otherwise flat horizon, the first of which was a stone circle around 100 metres away. The stones looked to have been mostly swallowed by the earth, leaving only stubs visible. Beyond that was a stone ruin, consisting

of crumbling walls with small uniform holes in them, which previously acted as windows. In the shadow of the only hill in this part of the island was an enormous grey mass. Blodwyn knew that there was no way it could be a stone; it was far too large. It had to be a building, which instantly made her distrust it. She wanted to retreat back to the relative safety of the boat.

Llyr studied the frown on Luke's face. Evidently, he must have been unhappy with what he had seen in the stone remnants. Surely, Luke and the Wings must have encountered people with different beliefs before? Did they always react with hostility? He was about to ask Luke when he was interrupted.

'Haló,' came the call.

Over to their left, from the hilly side of the island, two men approached. After his exertion, Llyr had removed his robe and the islanders were shirtless too. He appreciated the hardiness of these men. As they came closer, more of them seemed to appear out of nowhere. In little bumps and miniscule valleys in the land more and more of them rose. Llyr was sure that they weren't coming out of the ground, rather they just sort of, appeared.

In just a few moments, their number had gone from two to twenty. He didn't want to take his eyes off them in case he turned back and there were hundreds. But, recalling the view he had seen across the machair, he realised that there may be more on the island than initially met the eye.

Blodwyn rushed over to Llyr, 'Hatchets, we need the hatchets. Surely?'

'I don't know,' Llyr whispered.

None of the people approaching had weapons raised, but they all carried tools. Hoes, forks, a scythe and a rake were held loosely, without ill intent, as if their work had been

disturbed. Behind them, nothing could be seen. It was as though they'd stepped out of a dream or into existence in that moment. The rain was getting heavier and now close to thirty had arrived at the beach. All of them had small markings on their arms and legs – images of water: tears, raindrops, waves, streams, waterfalls and ocean spray.

‘Haló?’ called one of them, although it was impossible to tell who. Blodwyn guessed that it was the man closest to them.

‘Hello,’ Luke was quick to fill the silence. ‘How are you?’

A woman stepped out from behind the first speaker. She nodded to him and he returned the gesture without taking his eyes off the lifeboat party. She took a few tentative steps forward so she stood on the sand. She smiled at Blodwyn, but only received a frown in reply.

‘Perhaps I could begin with a prayer?’ Luke said, drawing a breath.

‘No need for that,’ the woman shook her head. ‘We just want to know, what brings you here?’

‘Maybe later then. Hopefully later,’ Luke spoke quickly. ‘We are here to meet you.’

‘Oh, really? That’s kind,’ she smiled as a mother would to her child.

‘Do you get many visitors?’ Luke asked.

‘Not really no. It is usually the other way around. One of us leaves.’

‘I understand that,’ Luke turned, gesturing to the rest of the lifeboat party, ‘as will everyone here. We have all travelled a long way to be here. Some further than others. We are just glad to meet you. Tell me, what is this place?’

There were nods from the exhausted lifeboat party. Blodwyn eyed the islanders doubtfully. For the first time since leaving Stac, none of the strangers stared at her with disgust or even interest. She tried to make eye contact with anyone she could but all that greeted her was indifference.

‘This is Vaiteigh. And if you’ve travelled a long way you will likely want to rest. Although I see you had a favourable journey,’ she nodded to the boat and the sea.

‘If this is favourable,’ Luke chuckled.

‘It gets much worse.’

She turned, speaking to the islanders, in a language that sounded like exaggerated heavy breathing. Luke imitated it under his breath. Some of the islanders nodded, but most turned away and headed back towards the hill. Llyr watched as, just as they had manifested from nothing, they disappeared. Four people remained with the woman, each holding an ornate spear.

As they walked, Blodwyn noted that the spears were covered in delicate carvings. She couldn’t help but think of the axes and hatchets in the lifeboat. Even though she couldn’t wield one, she thought it necessary to bring them. She couldn’t understand why she was drawing comparisons between the worn and plain tools they’d left in the boat and the clean spears with their crisp images of waves, pools and flowing water. As the party walked toward the hill, some of the carvings appeared to be moving.

The closer they got to the hill, the arrangement of the palette subtly shifted. The steep incline in the land hadn’t moved, but the shadows against it had. Darker greens of thickened grass, with flecks of purple and brown dotted between, blew in the wind. Each step brought them closer to the answer, though they would never know it until the change. The machair made it hard to see any defined permanent ways. Had it been regular grassland or even the

forest floor there might have been one identifiable trail. Instead, hundreds of trails criss-crossed over one another in illegible chaos. The sound of waves crashing on the shore alongside the constant wind and rain was disorientating and Llyr felt like he was going to fall. Even when he tried to focus on a point straight ahead on the hill, it seemed to move with every step he made, and then the colours shifted again.

Blodwyn looked up and saw nothing overhead but a thick grey sky full of rain. As she brought her head back down some of the shapes ahead of her changed. With every step, there were more rough lines and people snapped into view. Smelling woodsmoke the air, the lines arranged themselves into low huts consisting of mud, mossy stone and straw. Llyr had only taken his eyes off the land ahead to look at his feet for a second, but when he looked up, he saw a woman breastfeeding a newborn. She sat under an awning by her hut and smiled a greeting at the group. The huts were long and thin and they all deposited thin, pale streams of smoke overhead. The settlement opened out ahead of them. Anyone passing nodded a greeting.

‘What is this place?’ Llyr asked.

‘Vaiteigh, home,’ the woman answered. ‘But being specific, this one is mine and I am Isla.’

She stood at the door to one of the huts, which was woven from branches and thin strips of wood.

‘We have a rule here, you can’t enter someone else’s home without knowing their name. You first,’ she held her hand out to Blodwyn.

Blodwyn didn’t trust Isla’s smile and was convinced that if she entered the hut she would never leave. In a frozen stalemate, Blodwyn stared while Isla waited. She looked at the

clouds overhead and pushed a thin, dirty strand of hair out of her eyes, tucking it behind her ear.

‘Come on, let’s get out of the rain,’ Isla said.

Inside, the stone walls were adorned with several tools. Blodwyn didn’t know the purpose of any of them but she made violent guesses. While the others were being welcomed in, she walked right through the wall. On the other side were two children, no older than five or six, were playing a game in some straw. They stopped and stared at Blodwyn.

‘Haló,’ one said.

‘Hello,’ Blodwyn waved, choosing to back into the house.

In the centre of the room, a peat fire smouldered and above it was a bubbling pot of vegetable broth. Everyone sat around the pot and Isla took another lump of peat from a pile near the door and placed it next to the fire. She urged everyone to disrobe and hang up their clothes around the fire. Two of the men carrying spears had come inside and they stood guard at the door.

‘Excuse that,’ she said and gestured to the guards. ‘We Vaiteighian aren’t used to visitors.’

‘That’s ok,’ Luke answered.

‘Right, who’s first?’ Isla said.

She ladled out a steaming serving of broth into a bowl and handed it out. Llyr eyed the others, and none reached for it. He watched Luke inhale, guessing that he was about to muddle through a reason for not accepting the food. Nevertheless, Llyr happily took the bowl and blew on it.

‘Smells good, da iawn diolch.’

‘That’s alright,’ Isla smiled.

In quiet disbelief, Blodwyn watched the others eat. Their compliance didn’t make sense to her, but she didn’t feel the exhaustion they felt – fatigue running through flesh and into bone. Llyr exchanged looks with her and for that she was thankful. At least he could play along. If needed, he’d change direction with the situation. She realised just how often he had done this, recognising that it was something intrinsic within him. He could move in and out of different groups with ease. But then, Blodwyn thought of other people she’d known who were all alone in the world, who were nowhere near as good as Llyr at navigating social norms, particularly when until very recently, he had never seen the outside of Stac. They’d both quickly become used to things like daylight, and were getting accustomed to the weather too, but other things, such as trusting others, wasn’t always learned.

‘I should invite you to our Eaglais? Our Kirk?’ Isla said, craning her neck up to Blodwyn who was still hovering near her escape route.

‘Why?’ she snapped back.

‘I am trying to feed and warm you before you leave,’ Isla lingered on the last word before adding, ‘but there are other ways of being fed and warmed.’

‘It is funny you should mention church; we could discuss worship. The who, why and how of it all,’ Luke blew over his broth, having finally decided to eat. ‘All paths lead to purpose, don’t they? In one form or another, and we all make it there eventually. Even if ‘there’ is just the beginning. Lovely broth by the way, it is nice to have something warm.’

‘That’s alright. We don’t worship, as such.’ Isla said.

‘Don’t worry, not all of us do,’ Llyr smiled.

‘But, “paths to purpose”, what an intriguing way of putting it,’ Isla mused, blowing on a spoonful.

‘What do you mean?’ Luke asked and struggled not to frown at Llyr.

*

The bodies huddled around each other in a heap by the fire and Llyr was glad of the rest. Outside, voices dulled by the stone and mud walls wafted past the house. Blodwyn’s body was still inside but she’d pushed her face through the wall. Llyr nodded at the armed guards and in unison they reciprocated.

‘What’s going on?’ Llyr asked.

Blodwyn tucked her head back. ‘Oh, you’re up. Well, they’re all leaving. No sign of Isla either.’

As if she’d been summoned, the door opened and Isla snuck in through a tiny a gap.

‘Ah, you’re up. Well one of you is,’ she whispered. ‘We’re heading to kirk, maybe you two would like to join us? The others can stay, I shouldn’t want to disturb their sleep.’

Blodwyn and Llyr eyed each other, seeing a shared curiosity. It seemed to Llyr that Blodwyn was weighing this up when her eyes glazed over. It was as though everything that made her, *her* left for a moment. Each time it happened, it seemed to last longer, but Llyr didn’t want to count the time. On some level, Blodwyn knew what was going on, if not during then definitely after, when her eyes rolled back into focus and awareness returned.

‘What?’ Blodwyn said, shaking her head.

‘It’s alright,’ Llyr offered and he placed a hand through Blodwyn’s back.

‘It’s not though, is it,’ she mumbled.

‘I really think you ought to come,’ Isla said.

She led them outside, although Blodwyn chose to use the wall instead of the door. Strangely, she couldn’t see anyone else like her among the group. Everyone was alive. The rain stopped, giving way to cool clear darkness. One of the armed guards had accompanied them and was shadowed by Llyr. Blodwyn sighed, momentarily losing herself in the countless stars.

A robotic sense of duty thudded through the throng in each footstep. Ahead lay the ruined church in which some people were already sitting down. Islas, Blodwyn, Llyr and the guards filtered in respectfully through a specific gap in the walls, which had surely contained a door at one time. Then again, perhaps not? They wouldn’t have destroyed their own church, would they? And they wouldn’t have just neglected to maintain it if it was of daily importance. No. The thought struck him harder than the stone he’d accidentally kicked – it was never finished. Either that or there was no need to restore it, a deeper meaning was found by looking at the unfinished and completing it in your head, like adding colour to a black and white sketch. There was something in that, a meaning that he caught hold of, but that slipped away before it could be articulated.

At the back of the congregation, the group sat down. Most heads poked above the height of the walls and Blodwyn tucked her skirt down over her legs. She’d given up trying to guess how much more of her had disappeared. There was no prize for a correct answer and, hard though it was to admit, she couldn’t remember the results from her previous assessment.

Llyr tried to lean around the people in front by perching up on his knees. ‘I don’t get it, there’s no one there...’ he muttered.

‘Just wait,’ Isla whispered.

The last few people filtered in near the front. Blodwyn kept expecting someone to stand up and take a speaking position behind the tallest stone at the head of the congregation, and wondered whether a latecomer would rush in and apologise. Moonlight shimmered through non-existent windows. For several minutes people sat in near silence save but for the occasional cough while pale blue and green light streaked across the sky. The streams twisted around each other and wound over the ruin but none of the congregation looked up. Blodwyn stared wide-eyed at the display. Rivers of colour ran through one another like ribbons in the wind. As soon as Blodwyn thought they were going to disappear they'd blend in on themselves again and dance to an unheard tune.

Someone got up from the front. Llyr couldn't see their face. They placed a small wooden bowl on the altar stone and touched whatever was inside, placing that same finger on their neck and drawing a line down to their chest before sitting down. They were followed by another who repeated the action. Llyr kept trying to see what was happening and was particularly interested in what was in the bowl, but when he tried to stand, Isla gently tugged at his arm.

'A bowl left out in the rain. We add some sea water. The temporary and the permanent. Neither has an end or a beginning,' Isla whispered.

Soon the people just in front of them were going up. Llyr followed Isla to the altar. His first thought was, just water? Then he remembered just how hard-won water was inside Stac, his first encounter with a river, a lake and the sea. On some level, he understood. His own need and routine thirst fostered respect. He placed a fingertip onto the surface, no further, then dabbed his neck.

All eyes fell on Blodwyn and she didn't know where to look. The tattooed shoulders and arms of the mass congealed themselves into one body of water and so their faces didn't

matter. As soon as she had got hold of a distinguishing feature in her mind – a beard, full lips, a high forehead – it was swallowed by the water. She sighed when she saw Llyr's head above all the others. She wound through the congregation to the altar. Llyr mimicked the gesture he had only just learned. Questions flew through Blodwyn like a trapped bird. What was the point, why was she even there, how long had it been since she last lost focus and blacked out? The colours swirled overhead. The dance was being led by an emerald green.

She placed a finger on the surface of the water. Cold. Wet. For the first time in more than five decades, she felt a genuine physical sensation. She stared open-mouthed at Llyr, who, in his innocence and naivete, had no idea what had just happened. Isla was over his shoulder. Gently, Blodwyn touched her own neck; she felt heavy and a sudden mass spread out from the contact between the two parts of her body. A pinhead drip ran down Blodwyn's skin, onto her chest. She shivered. People can't be brought back from their first death, can they?

Taking Llyr's hand, Isla places it into Blodwyn's. For the first time, it didn't sink straight through. Blodwyn identified Llyr's coarse palm rubbing up along her own. Their fingers intertwined. In each knuckle, she experienced a slight pain as her fingers fought for room. She felt the beginning of a pulse, opening her mouth to breathe, anticipating the taste of the night air. In an instant, it was gone. She closed her eyes and opened and closed her hand. She didn't have to look to know it was just passing through Llyr's palm.

'What... what was that?' Blodwyn asked. She was unsure if her voice would sound different. The feeling of mass had left her.

'You're ready now,' Isla said.

'Ready?' Llyr asked.

'Yes, time to be free.'

‘You mean, I’m going to... dissipate?’

‘That’s only one way of looking at it. We won’t see or hear you, but you have been ready for a while.’

The congregation, a sea of smiles, murmured behind them.

‘How do you know...’ Llyr started.

Examining her hands in the moonlight, Blodwyn saw that she flickered in and out of being. The moonlight shone through her. She watched as her left hand receded up to the wrist. All that remained of her palm and fingers was a silvery outline. She drifted out of the church.

Feeling the tickle of her lips with each word, Isla whispered directly into Llyr’s ear, ‘I don’t know how it started or how it even works. No one does. I think it is about being at peace with what is happening and to let it. Stop fighting it. We have a saying, *what comes in the wind is washed away in the rain*. You can’t fight the rain. You can’t push back the tide.’

Llyr considered this, taking it too literally. He thought that, actually, you could fight the rain by being dry. Afterall, he’d spent his entire life not knowing rain existed. Then, there was Blodwyn’s hand. He was guided to act by something, mimicking her movements the way he did, but he didn’t actually *feel* her hand. He knew, from the look on her face, that she felt his. She didn’t recoil or pull away. She just, looked, seeing straight into his heart.

‘Can you show me how to do that?’ Llyr asked.

‘I don’t know. There’s nothing special about that water. It was just her time and creating a space in which she can feel ready to, you know, let go. It doesn’t work the same way every time and you’ve got to remember, I’ve seen it happen a lot.’ She paused. ‘Our minds are very powerful. We can change how we feel about things. We can let go.’

‘So, it isn’t real?’ Llyr was confused.

‘It is nothing but it is everything to anyone who wants to try.’

Picking up the smooth wooden bowl, with only an inch or two of water in it, Llyr peered in. After a thorough assessment, he concluded that it really was just water. Isla invited him to return the bowl to the altar. The bowl looked rather small on the altar, as though a strong gust could blow it away. Llyr was struck again by the unfinished or part destroyed nature of the church. He was convinced there was something in that, a purpose or a meaning, but again the answer was hidden.

LIFT

Since leaving the church, Blodwyn hadn't spoken, her gaze fixed mostly on the floor. Llyr knew it wasn't her usual black-out stare; she wasn't empty, just lost in thought. In Isla's house, Luke and the others still slept. Isla slipped into bed, drawing a curtain around it, while Llyr lay near the fire, watching Blodwyn, wanting desperately to tell her he was there if she needed him. It was hard to fathom how much of her had gone. He knew it was different for everyone – he'd seen enough of that in Stac – but he had no way of knowing if it was the same outside. And it wasn't his place to ask, not unless she chose to tell him. He closed his eyes.

Blodwyn couldn't square away what had happened. It had been so long since she'd felt anything other than pain from the Runes inside Stac that she was entirely preoccupied by trying to decide if the physical sensation was genuine. The intrinsic feeling of a texture, or a temperature is impossible to doubt. Up until tonight, she'd barely been able to remember what it felt like to touch another person. No one, she assumed, had reason to challenge what water felt like, or how another person's living skin felt along with their own.

If it wasn't genuine, then what had happened, she questioned. She wouldn't rush to recapture the feeling, which in itself was odd. She wasn't clamouring for her life back because she knew that it was long dead. No part of her wanted to rush back for the bowl of water and attempt to bathe in it. Curious. As Isla had said, perhaps she truly had let go. Blodwyn was familiar with the phenomena of life flashing before a person's eyes before death or a near end experience and knew that it didn't necessarily mean they wanted to be a child again or relive a highlight moment from the past. It was merely a mandatory procedure, something that a life uses to try and make sense of an upcoming end, an attempt to reason with and process the situation before arriving at a farewell. She blacked out.

Llyr dozed. He was only disturbed when Luke woke and adopted the posture of prayer. Soon, Luke's mutterings were accompanied by the others, who also knelt around the peat fire, sighing and giving thanks. Llyr sat up.

'Ah, Llyr, wish to join us? Perhaps you could take the lead?' Luke bristled with excitement.

'Don't you think we should be quiet? I think Isla is still asleep,' Llyr whispered.

'Ah, yes. Sorry.'

'No matter,' Isla yawned.

'We actually got back from their church, kirk, not long ago you know.' Llyr cleared his throat.

Blodwyn remained, staring into space as though Luke wasn't standing uncomfortably close to her. He shook his head, taking a step back.

'What's this then Blodwyn, care to share?' he asked.

'How... how... how are you?' she managed. Her voice sounded like it had travelled a great distance to be there. It echoed into being and cut off at the end of the question.

'I'm fine Blodwyn, how are you?' Luke asked.

'Sut wyt ti?' her distant words trailed into a whisper.

'Blodwyn?' Luke said, raising his voice.

'Hey,' Llyr stood between them. 'Maybe try again later.'

Llyr clenched his fists. Luke took a sharp step back, and the other volunteers froze, eyes darting between the two of them. Llyr moved forward, each step measured, imagining Luke lunging, feeling the surge of instinct that would force him to act. He silently dared Luke

to make a move, every muscle coiled, every nerve taut – but deep down, he knew Luke wouldn't. The air between them buzzed with unspoken challenge, as if the room itself were holding its breath.

'I'm sorry,' Luke said. 'It's been a rough few days. May Themme give us strength and patience. Blodwyn is clearly going through the Process. It is advancing. That is beautiful and must be protected.'

Llyr nodded and stood alongside Blodwyn. She was absent and he wished she would flick the hair out of her face, or even frown. Any sign of engagement from her would be welcoming. Llyr thought about that confused but also faintly condescending face she sometimes wore when she saw him doing something new. He willed it to wash over the blank canvas.

'When she's ready she'll speak and we need to be there to listen,' Isla's voice cut through the house like a scythe through wheat. 'Hear, listen, it's pretty easy once it gets going.'

'Isla,' Luke started, 'would you like to listen to us and what we have to say?'

'I think, hmm, how to put this? I can listen but I can tell you right now that you won't convince me and neither I you. Who knows, there may be some truth to you but you see, you will leave and we will stay. I want to see you on your way.'

'There is only truth,' Luke said.

Silence filled the house. Isla turned away from Luke, chopping vegetables and throwing them into a waiting pot. Taking a spare pendant from his robe, he turned it over and over in his hands. Blodwyn began to drift – a few feet forwards then back again, around the same spot. Llyr avoided looking at her feet and legs, but he couldn't help but see the space

where her hands should have been. Llyr looked up. Neatly organised sticks and logs could never take the place of stars and streams of light.

‘Hello?’ Blodwyn said, sounding startled.

‘It’s alright,’ Llyr replied, rushing to speak. ‘I mean, you’re alright. Not that I wish to tell you how to feel. I mean... you’re safe.’

‘I hope you get better at this,’ Blodwyn laughed.

‘Me too,’ Llyr replied.

Around her, the world filled in, with walls, tools, seats and the fire. The sound of Isla chopping vegetables and throwing them into the pot, and the people sitting around the fire came into focus. Luke gripped his pendant tightly, muttering a few words into it.

‘How are you, Blodwyn?’ he asked.

‘I’m fine thank you. You missed something last night.’

‘What?’

‘Do you know, I’m not entirely sure. What happened. But everyone was there. The sky was full of colour, despite it being night. Then, I had a physical sensation.’ Blodwyn paused. Llyr raised her eyebrows at her and nodded, willing her to continue. ‘I think since feeling that, the heaviness of life, a weight has been lifted. I feel... Well, I can’t put it into words.’

‘Try,’ Luke spoke after a few beats of silence.

‘I really don’t know. I just, I think I need to *Go*. Not to Stac. Never to Stac. But to somewhere... *Go*. I think. I don’t know. It is hard to say.’

Llyr was surprised by Blodwyn's openness. Despite her difficulty with articulating her thoughts, he understood the sudden change. With the loss of her limbs, certain formalities had been stripped away. After all, he'd known some people to dissolve into a roaming fog of feeling. They'd descended into a single emotion, an attachment to a regret or an unpleasant memory forming their only anchor to the world. Now, given that every stone was placed with the purpose of containment, he wondered whether Stac somehow helped to create that negative anchor. It might be different in the open air.

'I'll go with you of course,' Llyr said, holding his hand open.

'I know,' Blodwyn replied, putting her hand through Llyr's. There was no sadness for the lack of physical contact. She was glad to know how he felt and she didn't want to dwell on missing limbs or gaps in memory. In that moment, all Llyr wanted to be was enough for her. He'd wanted to leave Stac just as much as she did and together they had felt like the only sane people in that prison. If he could untie any negative moorings, perhaps even find a safe harbour, he would and it would be enough.

*

Llyr didn't know if he had the strength to row all the way back, even if he had recalled the route. It seemed too large a task. The sea bore no mark from their journey. Luke and the volunteers spent an entire day gathering driftwood. Vaiteigh was, unusually, free from trees. According to the Vaiteighians, there were trees and a small forest on the other side of the hills. The islanders were happy to give Llyr what little they had to spare and presented it to Luke and the volunteers, who reluctantly added it to their signal fire. As soon as it was lit, the volunteers stayed near it, fussing over the flames and stripping all unnecessary wood from the lifeboat, assuring each other that it would still float.

Blodwyn faded in and out. Where she went in between, she didn't know, there was no real *feeling* or thinking in that other place. She likened it to the moment where the raindrop meets the sea. For that split second of impact, it is both a single entity and part of a whole. She struggled to articulate the image, even to herself, but it remained with her, guiding her back to consciousness each time she drifted.

'People have to make do with the tools they're given,' she mumbled.

'Yeah,' Llyr replied. 'Like when you say something as if we were talking and I then have to guess what to say.' They laughed. 'Oh wow, are these my feet?' Blodwyn laughed.

The stars were already out. Blodwyn wondered if there would be another light display that night. The pair frittered hours away watching the night sky, marvelling at how much clearer it was above the sea, as they traced the journey of shooting stars. Blodwyn enjoyed the way they fizzled out. They held a power and a motion not seen in any of the other thousands of little lights. When burning, they were about as bright as anything else in the heavens but they faded into black, indistinguishable from the dark expanse which defined the light.

Behind them, a little way inland, the Vaiteighians were headed towards their church again, a near silent walk, duty driven on the path to faith. The volunteers slept around their signal fire. Now that he was well acquainted with the sand and its ability to get into everything, Llyr couldn't believe the volunteers could sleep on the beach. Hunched over, Luke studied *The Veracity of Aire*, holding the book close to his body and occasionally looking up from the pages to mutter at the sky. After doing so, he let out a contented sigh and closed his eyes. Llyr was on the verge of asking him about what lay in the pages, questions bubbled within him. The book was thinner than he remembered. Previously, he had felt sure that he wanted to wear the robe and travel with them, but it was purely performative. Now,

seeing how contented Luke was by reading something, his compulsion to learn more became difficult to ignore. Reading made Luke genuinely happy, even after all they'd been through in their short time together.

‘Luke,’ he called, ‘what are you reading?’

‘The only book you will ever need,’ Luke said got up to face Llyr.

When he saw the congregation heading into the church, Luke snapped the book shut. His eyes darted back and forwards, trying to gain a fuller understanding of the ruin. Observing the congregation taking seats under the moonlight, he brushed past Llyr and walked a little way past Blodwyn. The building was a spectre of something greater. Llyr knew that and was curious as to the anger and confusion settling into Luke's face.

‘What are they doing? This is the church, correct?’ Luke asked.

‘Yes, that's it. I didn't know it would be happening right now to be honest.’ He turned to Blodwyn, ‘we should go over.’

‘Yes,’ Luke replied gravely, ‘we should.’

Llyr and Blodwyn had difficulty keeping up with the marching Luke. By the time they reached the church, the bowl of water was already on the altar, allowing the congregation to carry out their silent self-blessings. Blodwyn urged Llyr to join the congregation and he did so. Mostly, they were paid little attention, although a few heads turned to Blodwyn and Luke waiting on the side-lines.

Blodwyn was reluctant to try the water again because she knew that what needed to happen for her, had happened. There was no need to try again, and she dare not risk failure. A private miracle can be repeated in the theatre of the mind; there is no need to chase that first

high. Diminishing returns and bitterness was all it would provide. She saw another shooting star overhead and smiled at the blackness which ate its body and tail.

Llyr was on the cusp of putting his finger in the water when Luke charged forward. He slammed his book down onto the altar, threatening to topple the bowl. The congregation were unperturbed. Luke glared at Llyr and his wetted fingertip. As he performed the Water Rite, Llyr maintained Luke's gaze. He was seconds away from shoving Luke out of the church when a member of the congregation led Llyr away. The only thing missing from the previous night was the lights in the sky but otherwise, it was much the same. A cold peace blew over the embers of rage smouldering within Llyr. The ethereal window gaps framed chunks of night.

'Heathens,' Luke called, 'you are to be pitied. This stone hovel has the beginnings of a great place of worship. I do not wish to disturb your practice any longer. We shall return here someday. Hopefully soon.'

Llyr couldn't believe that no one had interrupted Luke's outburst and from the look on his face, neither could he. Though his rage tried to burn, a cool peace dripped down his nose from the Water Rite, soothing it into subservience.

'I leave with you the only book you will ever need. I understand that at least one of your number can read. It is to them that I entrust the task. And it is to them that we shall call upon when we return. In these pages,' he held the book high so all could see, 'you will find truth, love and guidance. Isla why don't you come and start us off with a few words.'

Her face was lost in the congregation. Llyr knew that the elderly woman who stood up to greet Luke and the book wasn't Isla. She approached the altar, holding the bowl and offered it to Luke. Confusion gave way to curiosity. He peered over the edge. 'Water?' he mumbled.

‘I shall partake, on the understanding that you shall try mine,’ he tapped the book.

Luke dipped his hand into the bowl then touched his forehead, drawing Themme with his fingertip. Even in the moonlight, it was obvious that his finger wasn’t wet. That fact would surely not be lost on the congregation, but they didn’t appear to care. Their stoic silence remained unbroken. Luke held the book aloft and placed it down on the altar before he backed out of the church.

As they made their way back to the beach, darkness engulfed them. Blodwyn kept looking over her shoulder at the church, from which the congregation flowed out and away, home, to smouldering turf fires and soft beds. The bowl had been removed from the altar. Although the strange shapes thrown by the shadows made it impossible to know for sure, it seemed that the book remained open. She didn’t have to guess what would happen to it in a heavy rain.

*

Llyr woke to the sound of the lifeboat scraping along the sand. Luke and the others were rushing it into the water. Llyr wondered if they were leaving him behind, but he saw that they’d tied it to a stake in the sand. Ahead. Michael’s ship loomed. The sun rose behind it, as though Michael was towing the light. Llyr thought that if he’d known, Michael would like that. He may have even planned it.

‘There’s the ship, come on Llyr, let’s get going,’ Luke called.

They threw themselves into the lifeboat and Blodwyn dutifully followed. She sat where the toolbox had been before it became a pile of embers. With the tide going out, they sped through the water with each stroke. Llyr matched pace with the others quite well. They threw themselves into each stroke, hauling with gritted teeth. Looking back on Vaiteigh,

Blodwyn couldn't see any people or any structures. It looked as empty as it had when they arrived. Empty. She hoped, for their sake, that they remained hidden.

Llyr could feel Michael's eyes from the bridge. He detested it. He tried to shake the gaze from his shoulders, but this only served to stoke his anger. They were greeted with ropes flung down into the lifeboat. To a chorus of cheers, the volunteers climbed aboard.

'Well, what do you know Luke,' Michael emerged from between the applause.

Performing a quick bow, the volunteers lined up before Michael. Llyr and Blodwyn lingered at the end of the line. Llyr noted the extreme upright posture of each person and for a moment felt like copying them. He felt guilty, but when he saw Blodwyn's absent expression, and her slouch, he smiled. In his peripheral vision, the outline of Blodwyn appeared to be made of thousands of dandelion seeds.

'As I'm sure you know now, we visited two islands,' Luke paused and waited for the inevitable nod from Michael. 'The first is... extreme. They have these things, devices, contraptions, anyway. I'd advise that we think twice before going back. We'd need numbers.'

'Noted. And the second?'

Luke looked over at Llyr. 'Heathens,' he said, shaking his head.

'Strange, because we passed that rock and didn't see anyone there. You're lucky we saw your fire,' Michael said.

'How about you?' Llyr asked, 'what do you know?'

The crew were taken aback and some even stepped away from Llyr, who frowned at their subservience. Michael managed half a smile. He walked over to Llyr and placed a hand on his bare shoulder.

‘Where is your robe?’ Michael’s half smile twitched in and out of existence.

Llyr took Michael’s hand and twisted it off his shoulder.

‘I lost it.’

‘Aren’t you cold?’

‘Honestly? I’m freezing.’

‘And your feather?’

‘Safe,’ Llyr said and tapped his waist.

‘We’ll get you a new robe,’ Michael said, reaching out to touch Llyr again.

‘What do you know?’ Llyr reiterated, louder than last time.

‘Plenty of heathens. I’ve filled in my map quite nicely. Much to do on the next journey up.’

‘The same map that said that island had kites?’

Silence fell on the deck.

‘That was what I was led to believe,’ Michael soothed, ‘I’m sorry if I got it wrong.’

‘You do realise people died there, don’t you? Your people? Dead. And over there it’s worse than dead. But you don’t know about that do you.’

Michael leant in towards Llyr, standing uncomfortably close. He spoke in a low voice and each word came out as though carefully chosen.

‘The list of names is long and anyone here would gladly be among their number.’

Llyr felt like this sentence had been on Michael’s tongue just waiting for the right question or situation to bring it out. Llyr looked for confirmation amongst anyone he could

see. They were all stood to attention or busying themselves with the necessary tasks of keeping the ship on course.

DOCK

Standing next to the bed, Blodwyn could see that during the night she'd lost yet more of both of her arms and wasn't far from being a floating torso. In her lucid moments, she asked herself whether it was all worth it. *Go* had contributed to her decline. Every mile mattered to what little being she had left. Of course, if it wasn't worthwhile then her only conclusion could be regret. Counter to this was the image of Stac, with endless wanderings and a life trapped in stone. The things she'd witnessed there were enough to outweigh any regret. Every second had been worth it. Others in Stac weren't so fortunate; they were doomed or resigned to echo in the darkness until the last sound dwindled away. What could she do to change it? Nothing. She'd tried to convince others to escape. Those who could hear chose not to understand, and those who understood chose not to hear. Her thoughts were comforted by the image of the fissure and the surety that one day, perhaps soon, it would crumble. It was designed to fail. With that thought, she was gone again, caught between the raindrop and the sea.

Llyr woke to find Blodwyn standing on pseudo-guard at his bedside. His jug of water had been filled and more fresh fruit and vegetables had been placed in the bowl. Before them was a clean robe, which appeared to be a lighter shade of grey than its previous iteration and someone had attached his feather to it. His clothes were long gone and to avoid freezing, he was left with little choice but to wear it. It felt coarse, scratching his skin and he hated the weight of it. Worse than that though, was the knowledge that he'd been searched in his sleep, it was the only way they could have taken his feather. He tried to twist it off and tease it out before tugging it, much too hard, freeing the feather but damaging the end. Pinching the disfigured end back into shape didn't work. Defeated, he sat back and tickled his hand with it, allowing the familiar comfort to take him back to a simpler time. He'd always wondered how it came off the creature that it belonged to, exactly where, on the body, that it came from, and

what the owner really looked like. He had Fir to thank for showing him the mural. At least now he knew what he was looking for. Red Kites, it seemed, weren't even all that red. He released the base of the feather from his pinch grip, when he noticed the tiny holes and scratches from where they had sewn it into the robe. This time there was no calming coolness to dampen his anger. Blodwyn listlessly stared above him. She might as well have been asleep.

The rain fell in thick drops and only essential crew were on deck. Knowing that he wouldn't be out in the rain, Llyr knocked on Michael's door. His anger grew with each unanswered knock. As Llyr was stuck at a crossroads between knocking again and turning away, Michael called him inside.

Michael sat at his desk over a pile of papers. Llyr tried to see what was on them. Some of the papers were much larger than others and they contained outlines of landmasses, presumably representing ones known or visited by Michael and the Wings. Some had been coloured green or blue, some had yellow areas shaded in, and there were words scrawled across most of them. The greens were littered with icons which were identical to the pendant. Reaching up, Llyr realised that, despite everything, he'd never removed his pendant. He hadn't noticed the mark the necklace had made on his neck and just how much it irritated him until he took it off.

Holding up a finger to Llyr, Michael said, 'Just a moment.' He scribbled at one of the pieces of paper, then stuck it on the wall above his desk. The handwriting was far too small for Llyr to read. Standing up, Michael moved from the chair to his bed.

'What can I do for you Llyr? I hope you understand that it is most unusual for people to call on me here,' he patted the bed next to him. 'Highly unusual.'

Eyeing the made bed, Llyr felt his stomach churn. His last meal jumped up and he had to swallow. He turned away. 'All of those symbols, this symbol,' he shook the pendant over his shoulder, 'they're places you've been? Where *you* have a presence?'

'Yes,' Michael's reply was quick and flat. 'Not me personally of course,' he narrowed his eyes, 'you understand that don't you? Here,' he patted the bed again, 'it's more comfortable here.'

Llyr was panting and fought to contain his breath. The pendant was sealed in his fist. It sounded like Michael was adjusting his robes.

'Show me, where were the kites. Or where did you think they were? You mentioned, what was it? A path flight? Where, show me?' he spoke quickly and had to wipe a bead of saliva away from his lips.

'Come now, Llyr,' Michael soothed, 'I wouldn't expect you to know. Maybe if I teach you to read the maps, then can I show you and you can help me. Help fill in the blanks. Come on now.'

'That's not what I asked. Try. Try to show me. Explain,' it took every ounce of control he had for Llyr to feel anything close to calm. He turned back to face Michael.

Michael's bare chest was visible and he'd rolled his sleeves up, his kite feathers peered over his shoulders. Like a bird, he looked ready to descend on a prey. Llyr's eyes darted around the room, settling on the jug of water. Of course, it was larger than any of the others he'd seen.

'What is a heathen?' Llyr asked, tired of waiting for an answer.

‘I think we should talk when you’re a little calmer. We’ll be back soon. Back where we picked you up. You’ll feel much happier when you’re on familiar ground. People always do. But for now, we can relax. We can unwind.’

Llyr seethed. The ground might be familiar, but in many ways it wasn’t. The ability to read the landscape and judge its moods had been robbed from him before it was even formed. No doubt that was done by someone like Michael, behind a desk, probably with a window and a panoramic view who decided that these things weren’t for everyone. Michael smiled and stood up. He was much taller than Llyr, who took a deep breath, allowing Michael’s rose water odour to sting the back of his throat.

‘Tell me, please.’

‘What is all this about, Llyr? Is it Blodwyn? Is that what troubles you? The process is well underway, I know. Llyr, trust that it is all in hand,’ Michael placed a hand on Llyr’s shoulder again. ‘I like the new robe by the way. Don’t worry, the chafing soon passes. Your body gets used to it.’ He played with the collar.

‘The process?’ Llyr asked, ‘Ah yes, when Beth died. You know Beth? Of course not.’ Llyr enjoyed the crack in Michael’s smile, ‘Luke was happy, they all were.’ Llyr wanted to break the fingers which teased around his neck.

‘Yes, we should all be happy when the process gets underway.’

‘Happy?!’ was all he managed before lunging for the jug.

Michael attempted to grab Llyr, but Llyr dodged and, gripping the handle of the jug, swung for Michael’s head. Water spilled everywhere. Michael grabbed Llyr’s arm, narrowly avoiding the blow and kicked Llyr’s legs out from underneath him. Llyr thudded onto the

floorboards. In a second Michael was on top of Llyr, shoving his forearm over Llyr's throat he gently kissed him on the forehead and leaned his full weight into the choke.

'It's alright,' Michael whispered.

Llyr fumbled around for the jug and his fingertips teased the handle towards his palm, so he gripped. Flying through the air, the bottom of the jug was embedded in Michael's temple, causing him to fall. As he struggled to free himself from the weight, Llyr fought for his breath. Breaking free and breathing heavily, he stood over a dazed Michael and stared at the jug, impressed that it hadn't broken. Llyr watched as Michael fumbled onto all fours and he waited until he was on the cusp of trying to stand before he brought the jug down again.

For a second time, Michael fell, Llyr followed up with another blow, shattering the jug. Taking the largest piece, he stabbed at the back of Michael's head, watching as blood flowed freely from the wound. He wanted to continue, but the rational voice in his head, which until then had been quiet, told him to walk away. Michael twitched on the floor in silence. Llyr removed his bloodied robe, shook the jagged piece of jug free from Michael's head and folded it up inside the robe. He took a clean robe from the back of the door, took a deep breath and headed out of the room onto the deck.

The rain pattered the deck boards. A single deckhand stood on the bridge at the wheel with their hooded face focussing only on the course. Despite the weather, they held firm and their eyes didn't deviate from the task at hand. Llyr quietly closed the door behind him and scurried back below deck. Two women, deep in conversation, nodded at him as he walked past.

*

Waiting in his cabin, Llyr sat bolt upright on his bed. He'd checked the robe over twice – no blood. It would be his word against Michael's, and that was only if Michael had any words

left. Llyr knew that the crew would believe Michael but buried this knowledge under his nerves. It might not even matter. He could be first off when the ship docked.

Blodwyn felt like she'd fallen into the room. She looked up – wooden ceiling boards or deck-boards, depending on your perspective. Taking a slow bite from an apple, Llyr faced forward. Blodwyn thought there was something different about him, other than the basic position of his body and the fact he was now wearing a robe. He seemed tight and tense. Once he finished the apple, eating the core and the pips, he gently placed his hands on his knees and gripped.

‘Everything alright?’ Blodwyn asked.

‘Oh, Blodwyn, yes thank you. How are you?’ Llyr lied.

‘No come on, I can see, what’s up?’

Llyr invited Blodwyn onto the bed with him, realising he mimicked Michael’s invitation and he shuddered. He shuffled closer to her and whispered into her ear. He couldn’t tell whether his lips had gone right through the side of her head, so he pulled back a little. ‘I... Michael and I... we had a fight. I hit him. A lot.’

Blodwyn thought about this for a moment. She wanted to ask who Michael was, but she waited until the picture was clear. Memory gave her the outline and imagination filled in the blanks until the two were one in the same. The bones were there but the flesh was lacking. She flicked her hair out of her eyes and tucked it over her ear with an invisible finger. Then she examined the space at the end of her arm. The hand that had only recently held Llyr’s was gone.

‘Well, I can’t say I’m surprised that you did,’ Blodwyn sighed. ‘Dare I ask why?’

‘It all happened very quickly. I don’t really know. He’s just... I’ve never been able to act before. Maybe Ioan, I tried there. I just... his face, Michael’s I mean. I guess I finally had a target. It may make our leaving a little bit more difficult though.’

‘Yes well, I can see that. And... I understand, believe me, I do. About the anger I mean. It wasn’t right. But it wasn’t wrong either. One of those grey things, I guess. I bet the part of you that is satisfied was very happy. I know I would have been too.’

‘Do you think?’

‘Oh definitely. I’ll tell you all about it sometime.’

Distant shouts spoke to loud voices on the deck. Only then did Llyr realise that the comforting patter of rain had gone. Between the calls, Llyr listened for something more horrified.

‘Blodwyn, while I have you. I don’t mean it like that, but you know. When we arrive, we’ve got to run. We’ve got to go. Right now. Promise me.’

‘We will. And you promise me. If I go, you know, away, that you’ll wait for me somewhere safe. Somewhere we know. Further up the shore maybe or-’

‘The circle,’ Llyr replied. ‘Remember? The stone circle?’

‘Yes. There.’

Her memory not being what it once was, the image was faint in Blodwyn’s mind, but the crude lumps stuck out of imaginary grass and she saw herself and Llyr in the middle of them. She closed her eyes.

The scraping had stopped and now the ship seemed to float on the spot. It was probably barely perceptible to others, but Llyr’s nerves were stretched out like a fishing line.

The voices on deck multiplied. There was a song in amongst the laughter. He stood up and nodded at Blodwyn, '*Go?*'. She nodded.

BRUME

Llyr passed Michael's door with a thumping heart. It was still closed, although there were two people hovering by it. One dared to put their ear to it. Llyr had to believe that Michael hadn't died, reckoning that if he had, he'd surely have emerged to scream at anyone who would listen, commanding them to seize Llyr. The two people by Michael's door spoke, Llyr couldn't hear them, but they couldn't have said more than a few words before each went in a separate direction.

Blodwyn and Llyr walked disembarked, nodding a greeting to other anonymous Wings. They walked off the gangplank and onto a newly built dock. The ship would no longer need to launch from the beach. People were still hammering nails into posts. Beyond it, there was a new structure – a wooden building with windows looking out to sea and a tall spire. On top of this was an enormous metal outline interpretation of Themme. With a wingspan of 20 feet or more, it looked like the image on the pendants rather than the flag. Llyr and Blodwyn hurried through the crowd, picking up the pace as wooden boards switched to dry land. Their wake was soon filled by people busily working. There wasn't a single stationary person in the area. Only Michael, who in Llyr's mind, was still lying on the floor of his quarters.

'I hate to think of how many more trees they've ruined for this,' Blodwyn said as they passed a huge pile of unworked logs.

They clearly intended to do much more, Llyr thought.

'Llyr,' the voice called from behind him.

He dared to look behind. Through the crowd, Luke jogged towards them.

'Where are you going?' he asked.

‘We figured we’d go our own way now. This was... I don’t know what it was, but I know I don’t want to do it anymore.’

‘Oh, come on. This is just a crisis of faith brother. I know. I’ve had them before. They pass. Give it to Themme. After what we’ve seen and been through? Give your doubts upwards,’ Luke said and Llyr knew he genuinely believed it. He wanted to hit him. Why hadn’t anyone checked on Michael yet? Someone must have knocked by now and not received permission to enter. But, thanks to the bonds of duty, they stood and waited.

Luke shook his head. ‘We have much, much more to show you,’ he almost whimpered. ‘I thought we would go along together on the next voyage, share a space.’

Although he was loath to admit it, Llyr did wonder what else they could show him. All his imagination could conjure was songs, with empty phrases and lessons that are only followed by those without a choice. It was hollow, like the air behind the bird – nothing.

‘Luke,’ Llyr started.

Before he could finish, shouts came from the ship. Even from this distance, Llyr could feel the difference in atmosphere. There were screams and in moments the deck was full of people. The ship’s waterline noticeably lowered. Blodwyn whispered, ‘Go’ as she fled past him. Holding his hands up to Luke, Llyr backed away. When he turned to see the commotion on the deck, Llyr ran.

The rain held off until they got to the stone circle. The silent monoliths greeted them as they had greeted countless others. Catching his breath, Llyr rubbed his hand along the incisor stone. Blodwyn had at least made it into the centre of the circle before she switched off, but she was now drifting in and out, between them but never through them. Despite the obvious vacancy, it looked like there was some sense and method being applied to her movements, although he knew if he asked, she wouldn’t respond. It seemed to be a slow-

motion dance, or just as easily some leaves caught in the whim of the wind. So much of her had gone. With the sun emerging from the clouds, she was getting harder and harder to see.

Just as a housefly gravitates towards the middle of a room, Blodwyn stopped sauntering between the stones and was drifting around more or less on the same spot, towards the centre of the circle. Llyr wondered if something in the stones was containing her.

Behind the incisor stone a pair of robed figures approached, running. Neither shouted but both carried wooden clubs. Llyr didn't recognise either of them and found a little kernel of confidence in that fact. He considered running too, but separating from Blodwyn was unthinkable.

As they approached, he could see that they were grinning, and one raised his club. Llyr acted without considering the consequences. Before he knew it, he lunged at the first attacker and tackled him to the ground. They bled profusely from the nose and Llyr managed to wrestle the club free.

'Try it,' he said to the other one.

'We just want to know why you left? Reconsider?' she asked.

'Just leave. Both of you.'

In a twitch, he caught the fallen man reaching for his leg, so he brought the club down hard onto his back, winding him.

'Leave,' he commanded.

Llyr thudded the club into the man's arm and knelt down beside him, 'leave,' he said. They scattered. Blodwyn sat down beside him.

‘Sorry,’ she started, ‘I don’t know, at least, I think I don’t know when it is about to happen but when it does. I’m gone. I know I am,’ she sobbed.

‘Don’t apologise. Just lead the way. I’ll keep an eye on you. Don’t talk if that will help. Just, find a place. You set the pace.’

*

For the rest of the day, they walked, although they had to stop several times while Blodwyn was adrift. Each time she came back with a shock to find a tiny bit more of her was missing. With every return came a split-second hope that everything was normal, that she was fine, she had a body, and limbs, and was whole in mind and spirit. Moments later, she woke to who she was.

When she could, Blodwyn led the way. She kept thinking about time and how little there was and how she didn’t have an exact number. Even if she knew a specific digit, she would doubtless wish it was bigger. It was useless then, to have a precise measurement. She just knew it was imminent but her bouts of clarity varied in their length. She decided to pick goals to work towards in the landscape. Once she’d chosen a specific tree or a rock, she set off at a such a speed that Llyr had trouble keeping up. Once they were off Ynys Gybi, they skirted the edge of the forest and wound around towards the mountain where more trees had been felled. Blodwyn felt their heartache infinitely more so than last time. Each stump sent out bleeding echoes that only she could hear. She couldn’t linger on them, although each one fought to be heard over its neighbour. The forest ached.

In the shadow of the mountain and along one of its foothills, she followed a brook. She knew that Llyr needed water and this seemed like as good a source any. It was clear and crisp and best of all, Blodwyn recalled Llyr’s happiness at encountering a river when they first left Stac. As a recent memory, the image was vivid, filling her with joy. She floated up

its length and for the briefest instance, thought she saw a reflection of a whole human being, fully formed and alive. She blacked out.

Llyr waited on the bank for Blodwyn to return. In the rippling current of water, he too could see the reflection of limbs which swayed gently, as though fully committed to a slow dance. Each time she left, he took care to keep her in sight, even if he chose to gather food. There was a great comfort in the familiarity of this land and he tore the hood off his robe to hold his gatherings. He'd never set foot on this side of the mountain before, and despite thinking that at any moment the Wings could emerge, he felt a powerful sense of déjà vu. It was as though the mushrooms were jumping into his pinch grip, rather than him picking them out of the ground. This wasn't home but he felt close.

Blodwyn returned, but didn't scream this time, instead managing to stifle the worst of the horror of consciousness in her state. Together, they ascended the hill and came to the edge of another forest, which Blodwyn thought she remembered from the view on the summit. There was another crescent shaped area of woodland and beyond the treeline was a small clearing. Moonlight pooled down onto luscious green grass, thick with moisture. Llyr's feet were sodden. The brook halted at a waterfall then continued up the mountain.

'Here,' Blodwyn muttered.

'Here?' Llyr replied and stood alongside her.

'Here,' she sighed.

The clearing looked like so many others they'd passed through. Llyr hoped that it was small enough to avoid being an attractive meeting spot for the Lost. He gathered wood and Blodwyn drifted around the pile. He thought this was odd, but wondered whether she needed the suggestion of a structure that a living person had made to bond to. It was as though the

last rational seed in her mind was seeking to circle around something alive. Her will, as he thought of it. He liked that and wasn't sure why.

It took hours for him to gather enough wood to make something resembling a shelter. He leant it up against a thick oak tree, behind which there was a steep incline. He reasoned that this would likely give him enough protection from the elements. The true luxury, however, was the constant trickling of a nearby waterfall – infinite water. Testing, he found that the shelter was strong enough to survive a kick. Admittedly, he hadn't put too much force into it. He wanted to rest. He thought that Blodwyn would likely make some joke about either his handiwork, or his kick, or both, and he chuckled at the imaginary conversation. She drifted around the remaining pile of wood, saying nothing and thinking even less.

*

Most of the leaves he'd used to line the roof of his shelter had rotted away. In time, he'd threaded hundreds of thin branches together in a crude imitation of Isla's roof. It wasn't entirely watertight, but any new front opening up was another chance to learn and improve. When the snow started falling, he had to extend the roof over the fire. At first, the snow amazed him, as it fell so much slower than rain, settling in a thick carpet. It piled up around trees and lined the brook in thick pillowy chunks. He tried eating a handful of it, enjoying it far more than he thought he would.

By winter, Blodwyn had dwindled away to little more than a head and a torso and her last moment of lucidity was at the start of autumn. In her last cogent moment, she'd done nothing but scream for help. All Llyr could do was say that he was there, everything was ok, no matter how many tears it came through. He told himself that she'd heard him, but deep down he knew the truth.

The bowl was coming on nicely. Llyr had gradually blunted several stones in its creation. The surface inside was by no means smooth but it held water – proven when he took it to the brook and filled the vessel. Despite the fact that his skin benefited from regular sunlight, fresh fruit and vegetables – which he foraged a short way over the other side of the brook – his reflection troubled him. His hair was long, though still as unkempt as ever and his face appeared fuller. The face staring back at him might as well have been a different person. He still wore the robe. He'd seen nothing of the Wings, but couldn't bear looking like them. Had anyone seen the two items together, robe and feather, they'd likely guess that he was one of them. It left a sour taste in his mouth. Without truly committing to the action, he placed the feather on the surface of the brook and let go. Running in the snow was difficult and so he watched until the feather was out of sight, returning to camp with the full bowl.

He scooped up a small handful of snow and placed it on the surface of the water. He stirred until the snow melted, seamless, into the cool water, and watched as the occasional flake fell from the sky and disappeared on the surface. It was but a brief moment before the colour fled from the flake, leaving it neither present or absent.

Llyr touched the surface of the water then tapped his neck. He felt the same sensation as last time – nothing beyond the drip of ice-cold water trickling down the front of his body. He left the bowl at Blodwyn's non-existent feet and waited for a lucid moment. He held no faith in the method but he thought that she deserved some comfort.

Lucidity arrived during the night, when Llyr was asleep in his shelter. The fire regularly needed tending to during the night and some part of his subconscious was acutely aware of whenever it dwindled down to embers and needed stoking and feeding. He woke and began the familiar process of stoking, bending down and blowing embers into fresh flames. They leapt up, illuminating the world around him in a brief burst of the orange glow.

‘Llyr,’ Blodwyn said.

Her voice sounded small and with an undercurrent of unnecessary shame.

Nevertheless, it was there and she wasn’t screaming. Throwing a handful of sticks into the blaze, he approached her.

‘Blodwyn, hello. Are you well?’ He thought that a stupid question.

‘Thank you, Llyr,’ she said.

Now, her eyes were the only clear feature. Everything else was mist, made blurrier by the falling snow. The mist floated in and out of a humanoid shape, but her eyes kept their razor focus. He hadn’t realised how much he’d missed Blodwyn’s piercing gaze. Sometimes, it looked like she could stare through stone. Of course, she had done from inside Stac, when she’d had countless dreams of outside.

‘That’s alright,’ Llyr sniffed, pointing to the bowl.

Blodwyn glanced down. Lips formed below the eyes and curled into a smile. A faint laugh echoed through the trees. Inside the bowl, the water had frozen. He willed a hand to reach down and touch it, but none came. Blodwyn’s lips faded away and her outline flickered and broke, like a chain of snowflakes.

‘No really, thank you,’ Blodwyn said, in a voice which was an echo of an echo.

Her eyes closed and were lost in the falling flakes. Her shape swirled into a fine fog. It circled around the bowl of ice until it was indistinguishable from the midnight air.

EPILOGUE

Llyr had topped up his food store, swept out his bedroom and thrown the tiny pile of debris onto the waiting fire. The clearing was in bloom and a few wildflowers had begun to poke through, turning their heads towards the sun. He was looking forward to cooking some mushrooms with some wild garlic.

He stood for a moment and inhaled, filling his lungs with the forest. It tasted different from day to day. Some days it was crisp and fresh, others it was cold and heavy but he lived with the promise that the following day would bring something new; a scent or sound permeated by the familiar brook and the stoic trees which he had seen wearing every season.

From time to time, he ventured further from the clearing. It was always worth checking the surrounding paths, few though they were, for signs of anyone passing through. Gathering food from further away from his camp gave the resources closer to home a chance to replenish. His little mountainside camp seemed to be out of the way for most people. He had climbed to the summit a few times but there wasn't anything up there to forage, only air. From that vista though, he saw a fire, doubtless another gathering of the Lost. He was happy to leave them to it, he told himself that he wasn't lost, he was found. Hours away from his camp, on the other side of the mountain was another, smaller clearing. It seemed to be of interest to nobody, just a few goats. By Llyr's reckoning, his camp wasn't all that far off the beaten path and he could rejoin it at any time if he wanted to, but the choice was his to make.

He descended the mountain to visit a wild pear tree, his favourite. He always took great care to only take half a dozen or so, eating one on the way back but saving the rest for his store. Folding up his pack, he jumped when he heard the sound of several footsteps in the valley behind him and ran to a nearby sycamore. Scrambling up the tree, he peered through its leaves as he watched a line of people trudge through the narrow valley. There were maybe

twenty or so of them. Each held onto the person in front in an unbroken line. Their clothes were ragged and worn and the few that dared to look around at their surroundings appeared pale and frightened. Llyr thought they looked like songbirds, with how fast their heads were twitching around. His heart stopped when he recognised their pallid skin. His had been the same when he left Stac. With growing recognition, he saw an elderly man holding onto the person in front, he gripped them on their pronounced hump. There wasn't a single smile on any of their faces.

'Ivor, Taidy,' Llyr said to himself.

Ivor appeared to be leading the line. Llyr thought about running down to them and showing them his camp, he had enough food to feed all of them for a few days and with that many people they could forage, grow and build in no time. But as the procession passed, he froze. He could think only of how they wouldn't listen before, remembering his own confusion at facing the outside for the first time. They had started their own journey and Llyr thought that he shouldn't interfere with that. If he approached, they might lash out at him, or rush away and end up with the Wings. If they happened upon my camp, Llyr told himself, I would make them welcome and help them but we are on different paths now. Stac had fallen. He only hoped that those at the top perished in its destruction. That desire powered his first steps up the mountain but it soon drifted away, superseded by birdsong.

Llyr stepped into his clearing and closed his eyes, bracing himself for the welcome sounds of home. It was never truly silent in the clearing. Above, a sharp flutter cut through the stillness, silencing every rustle and scurry in the trees. A red kite hovered before him, tilting its head as if it remembered him. Shadows of other kites circled it, weaving through the fading light, before settling. Four eyes – keen and unblinking – found him, and he sank to the ground, heart steadying against the weight of memory.

The fire whispered a soft pop, then a sudden crackle and the kites rose together, dissolving into the sky.

Then, almost invisible, he saw it: a spiral of haze twisting through the clearing, delicate and ephemeral. Llyr tuned out the forest, letting the quiet laughter reach him, teasing and coaxing. He stepped forward, heart aching with hope, and for a heartbeat, Blodwyn was there but just beyond reach. And then it was gone, leaving only the echo of its presence and the warmth of being remembered.

Llyr sank back to the ground, letting the earth steady him. He filled the clearing with a single heavy sigh and a broad smile spread across his face.

Critical Commentary: Hauntogeography

Abstract

The doctoral critical project will examine the hauntological and psychogeographical aspects of fiction set in Wales. It will establish a term for understanding the confluence of the two topics: Hauntogeography with the methodology being understood as Hauntogeographic practice. The hauntological nature of these stories will be explored and analysed to explore the confluence between the two concepts. I visit specific sites mentioned or covered specifically in the chosen texts and conduct dérives in a rural landscape, thereby showing the merits of rural psychogeography, thereby establishing the concept of, Hauntogeography or, Walking the Narrative.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	273
Chapter 1: Hauntogeography	281
1 Research Aims	281
2 Choice of Texts.....	290
3 Steps Toward a Dérive	294
Chapter Two: Cwm Garon by L.T.C Rolt	296
1 Text Analysis.....	296
2 Llanthony Priory Dérive	302
Chapter Three: <i>Sheepshagger</i> by Niall Griffiths.....	319
1 Text Analysis.....	319
2 Cambrian Mountains near Aberystwyth Dérive.....	328
Chapter Four: <i>One Moonlit Night</i> by Caradog Prichard	337
1 Text Analysis	337
2 Bethesda Dérive.....	341
Chapter 5: CONCLUSION	Error! Bookmark not defined.

Introduction

This critical report is designed to provide an overview of the practice of Hauntogeography – a definition for this is provided below. This is achieved by analysing the aspects of landscape and its effects on character in three specific texts set in rural Wales. Then, through the use of a rural *dérive* the landscape of both the narrative and the place in which it is explored.

Hauntogeography – is defined as the confluence of psychogeography and hauntology, a study of the juxtaposition of character and landscape where one haunts the other and vice versa.

The rural *dérive* is used to ‘haunt’ the source text while the source text ‘haunts’ the landscape, enhancing the reader’s experience of the narrative.



Figure 1: The cycle of Hauntogeography

This haunted, enhanced reading experience will be achieved via a rural *dérive* in which I follow a character’s journey and ‘walk the narrative’ – walk through the landscape guided by the text – during these walks the boundaries between respective realities (ours and

the fiction) are blurred. Presented as inserting myself into the fictional world, because, the *dérive* traverses the fictional and the real. It is followed by a commentary viewing events, sources, the facts and revisiting the source text through a hauntological lens.

Having defined Hauntogeography as the confluence of psychogeography and hauntology, and treating the novel portion of this thesis, *Restless* as the Hauntogeography from the writer's perspective, it is necessary to highlight that this critical report exhibits a move from the writing of Hauntogeography to reading and researching it. The transition needs to be made explicit because the creative and critical components are not separate responses to the research, rather they are interconnected ways of exploring the same relationship between fiction, memory and haunting. By their very nature, these topics are, as I will go on to explain, reciprocal and that is also true of the writing.

This movement from writing to reading is itself relevant to a hauntological understanding of literature and indeed it is necessary to try and pin down an explanation for the simplest reason: a writer reads. Julian Wolfreys asks what it means, "to read or write with ghosts¹", suggesting that reading and writing can themselves be understood as haunted. Julian considers the spectral aspects of literary texts and the ways in which they persist directly affects the way they are received when being read. Put simply, a work of fiction does not cease to have an affect when the reader closes the book or text, meanings and images can be carried forward into the next reading experience or in day-to-day life.

The novel exists materially as a completed creative work, but its significance is not contained within that completed object. It enters the future through its readers, whose encounters with the fictional landscape create new relationships between the text and the world beyond it. The reader therefore carries the novel into the Critical Report, where the

¹ Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002)

experience of its fictional world becomes the starting point for a different form of engagement with the research.

This is a natural point to pause and consider how the distinction between writer writing and writer who is reading. As a writer, I constructed a work of fiction inspired by real events and places, the characters in my novel are shaped by their relationship to place. Readers however encounter the works of fiction, and in the case of my novel, they form their own unique relationship with the landscape described therein, the landscape transforms from something created and represented by the writer to something the reader imagines and inhabits. The critical perspective here asks, what occurs in that movement? How does fiction alter the reader's understanding of place and vice versa?

This process mirrors the reciprocal conceit at the core of Hauntogeography: the relationship I have described through my diagram could easily be mapped onto these creative and critical components. The novel haunts the critical report, because questions raised and encountered during the writing process are figured out and given space to be answered during the writing of the critical report, they are influencing the questions I developed about the texts covered here. The critical research haunts the novel because the theories of psychogeography, hauntology, memory, landscape and indeed even Welshness have informed the way the creative work understands and evokes landscape. They should be considered inseparable; the two components exist within a reciprocal cycle. Writing generates questions; critical investigation provides new ways of understanding those questions; those understandings return to the creative work; and the completed creative work subsequently provides the reader with an experience through which the critical ideas can be reconsidered. In this respect, the creative and critical components operate in much the same way as the rural literary *dérive* described in this report: each provides a means through which the other can be revisited.

This also explains why the reader's movement from *Restless* into the Critical Report is significant. The reader does not arrive at this section without the influence of the creative component. The fictional landscape, characters and events encountered there remain present as the reader considers the theoretical discussion that follows. The creative work is therefore absent in one sense—it is no longer the immediate object of the reader's attention—but present in another, because it continues to shape that reader's interpretation of the critical material. It is precisely this simultaneous presence and absence that makes the transition particularly appropriate to a hauntological framework.

The creative and critical components consequently work together to investigate Hauntogeography from different positions. *Restless* approaches questions of landscape, memory, absence and haunting through the imaginative possibilities of fiction, while the Critical Report approaches them through theoretical analysis and the practice of the rural literary *dérive*. Neither component provides a complete answer independently. Their relationship is instead cyclical and reciprocal: the creative work generates an experience which can be critically examined, while critical reflection provides concepts through which that experience can be reconsidered. The movement from writer to reader is therefore not a departure from the creative research but its continuation in another form.

Harold Bloom described 'Real reading' as a lonely activity, Harold Bloom². Though it can be done almost anywhere, it is usually performed alone. Through their individual imagination, readers enter the world of the narrative. Countless settings for texts can be visited by readers and the many walking tours of famous books or events – *Dracula*³ walks in Whitby or any number of literary walks in London – are proof of this. While these group events are sufficient for connecting the reader to the location of the text, their similarity to the

² Bloom, Harold, *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (London: Harcourt, 1994), p. 519

³ Stoker, Bram, *Dracula* (London: Penguin Classics; Revised edition 27 Mar. 2003)

solitary reading experience is lacking. At the time of writing, there is also an increasing interest in engaging with rural spaces, similarly to those literary walking tours, this can and regularly is being undertaken by people in groups.

‘...the joyous democracy of gathering together to experience something more nourishing than concrete and tarmac. They also involve a mounting interest in the kind of enchanting, magical aspects of life that we will only find if we connect with nature – and the traces of much older ways of living that pepper our landscape.’⁴

John Harris

This quote taken from a recent *Guardian* article by John Harris highlights the growing interest in the rural spaces lying within our reach. Rural pursuits such as walking, wild camping and wild swimming have long been undertaken, but in recent years their popularity and the general interest in the great outdoors has increased. This may be due to a variety of factors including the public knowledge of the decline in quality of the United Kingdom’s waterways, a rising interest in Neo Paganism and its relationship to the natural world and the rise of environmentally conscious politics, to name a few. Interestingly, Harris uses the words ‘enchanting’ and ‘magical’ as states of being achieved when in connection with nature. As an increasingly urbanised society, we are aware of the need for a connection to nature. Harris describes this connection as ‘nourishing’ and it is surely a necessity as the antithesis of nourishment is malnutrition. Exploring any of the natural world that the UK has to offer, or even just access to outdoor space, is bordering on a necessity. It is also interesting that he uses the term, ‘the joyous democracy’, a reference to the Right to Roam movement, the landscape is for all to enjoy. There are, other than distance and time, no barriers to entry. All a person needs is the funds and/or means to travel to a suitable place and start walking.

⁴ Harris, John, *The Guardian* [Online] Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/apr/21/radical-british-politics-nature-establishment-environment-right-to-roam-polluted-rivers> [Accessed 14th October 2024]

This section will explore the contrast between novels set in cities and those set in rural locations. These, ‘older ways of living’ mentioned by Harris are reflected in the land itself. A city can change comparatively quickly, while hills and natural landmarks mentioned in a rural text often have and continue to stand the test of time. The valleys mentioned in *Cwm Garon*⁵, as geological features, will only change in deep time. There have been no road developments in the area for decades and therefore the landscape itself would be recognisable to a person from a hundred years ago and potentially even a hundred years into the future barring some kind of massive man-made impact. Could it then be argued, that there is a timeless quality to these places? In much the same way that a great song or a great story can ‘transcend time’ can a location do the same? Farmed land can see change in levels of soil, so that fields may appear shallower or deeper than they once did and quality of fencing and hedges may alter but the footprint they have on the land – their defined borders – will also be largely unchanged, particularly in more remote regions that are less likely to have seen major investment. The old paths, some of which have existed for centuries, can still be traversed. Much like old stories, though they can be reprinted and appear in an updated format, like a kindle or an audiobook, the narrative itself remains unchanged.

There are many ways in which we can choose to enter rural spaces – hill walking, wild camping, fishing, twitching etc. I posit that another way of entering, or engaging with rural spaces in a physical way, is by using a combination of the *dérive* and the knowledge of where a certain book is set. By linking walking and reading, two well established so-called slow activities, a person can foster mindfulness and creativity by participating in these hobbies. The rural *dérive* used here is another slow activity. The definition of a *dérive* given

⁵ *Sleep No More Railway, Canal & Other Stories of the SUPERNATURAL* (Stroud: The History Press, 2013).

by Guy Debord, a founding member of Situationist Internationale – an international organisation made up of artists and intellectuals – is as follows.

In a *dérive* one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. Chance is a less important factor in this activity than one might think: from a *dérive* point of view cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.⁶

While the *dérive* is traditionally an urban phenomenon, this piece of critical writing argues that the above definition of a *dérive* could be practised in a rural space. I argue the following:

Contours exist in nature. Rivers, cliff faces, waterfalls etc are natural barriers which have to either be navigated or traversed. Indeed, increasing levels of signage in rural areas telling people not to jump/run/fish/swim may be an example of an element of something typically urban – signage – present in the rural. ‘...cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.’ These contours also exist in nature, ‘drawn by attractions of the terrain’ is even more pertinent in a rural environment where such attractions are or at least appear to be wholly natural. For example, a thin strip of beach alongside a river whose banks are otherwise muddy or rocky may be a strong attractor to a walker / hiker in need of rest. ‘Certain zones’ and their respective barriers can be harder to see and recognise in rural areas – you won’t necessarily always know when you are travelling from land owned by one person or organisation to another. This can make travel through man-made zones more

⁶ Debord, Guy, Situationist International Online. [online] Cddc.vt.edu. Available at: <<https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theory.html>> [Accessed 4th December 2023]

seamless. Or, to think of zones in another way, they can be recognised as different environments altogether. Woodland into field through a river and back into field for example.

As well as being an urban phenomenon, the traditional *dérive* is undertaken in company. That is not to say that one cannot *dérive* alone; this is entirely possible, just as one can *dérive* in the rural space.

To maximise the effectiveness of the endeavour, it is important to consider its aim. All indications in the corpus of literature surrounding the *dérive* are that the most fruitful numerical arrangement consists of several small groups of two or three people who have reached the same level of awareness, since cross-checking these different groups' impressions makes it possible to arrive at more objective conclusions. It is preferable for the composition of these groups to change from one *dérive* to another to further enhance the objectiveness of these conclusions. With more than four or five participants, the specifically *dérive* character of the endeavour rapidly diminishes, and in any case it is impossible for there to be more than ten or twelve people without the *dérive* fragmenting into several simultaneous *dérives*. The practice of such subdivision is in itself of great interest, but the difficulties it entails have so far prevented it from being organized on a sufficient scale.⁷

Given that, 'cross checking group impressions makes it possible to arrive at more objective conclusions', and that objectivity is by its nature inherently personal, I posit that to *dérive* alone is not only in keeping with the experience of reading the source texts, but that it may also foster a more objective conclusion given the aforementioned personal and therefore individual nature of objectivity. That isn't to say that another person couldn't perform the same *dérives* as outlined in this document, on the contrary, in doing so I and a fellow traveller could 'cross check' our findings in much the same way that two people who have read the same book would discuss their impressions of it.

⁷ Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Ken Knabb (London: Critical Editions, 2021)

Chapter 1: Hauntogeography

1 Research Aims

The aim of the rural literary *dérive* is not necessarily to draw objective conclusions, but rather, to augment both fiction and the landscape in the mind of the reader. Therefore, my rural literary *dérive* has a relationship to text and so must resemble reading which is usually a solitary activity. It is necessary therefore to undertake my *dérives* alone. As Debord states, ‘One can *dérive* alone,’ this practice is not excluded from his definition of the *dérive* as he does not state that it is not possible. His ‘fruitful numerical arrangement’ will naturally be different due to our different aims.

The rural *dérives* undertaken for this piece had a simple formula: having determined where a story is set, one enters that rural space with a view to drift through it, visiting the landmarks featured in both the physical and fictional world. In the first *dérive*, having found exactly where the story takes place in our world, I follow the journey taken by the protagonist, beginning with staying in the same inn. In the second, finding the exact area proved more difficult and so I used a technique devised by Robert Macfarlane, consisting of drawing a circle on a map and attempting to walk the circle. On the final *dérive* I was able to closely follow landmarks mentioned in the text.

Jameson’s idea of cognitive mapping helps explain what a rural *dérive* can do when the goal is to augment the fiction by bringing a fictional landscape closer to the real world. In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*⁸, he writes that, “The alienated city is no longer to be grasped in the old classical way; cognitive mapping in this sense is not exactly mimetic—it is an attempt to represent the unrepresentable totality of the

⁸ *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991.

contemporary world system”⁹ In other words, the representation alone – the text – might not be enough to fully inhabit a given fictional world. A *dérive* through a rural space, guided by the source text, becomes a way of mapping and experiencing the unseen connections between story and place. Walking through the landscape, noting how it diverges from or aligns with the narrative, is a form of cognitive mapping in action. It is not about copying the novel exactly, but about noticing the ways fiction and reality intersect, and tracing the lines where one bleeds into the other.

The texts ‘walked’ here are, ‘Cwm Garon’ by L.T.C Rolt, *Sheepshagger* by Niall Griffiths and *One Moonlit Night*¹⁰ by Caradog Prichard. I wanted to avoid choosing anything rooted in fantasy. While there are certain supernatural elements in two of the chosen texts, I also wanted to explore a location which is new to me whilst also being set in Wales. It was important, for the *dérive* process, to engage with a place which is new to me on the page before I actually put boots on the ground. Note, finding the real-life inspiration for a fictitious location or even a direct like for like location used in the story would of course be much more difficult in something like high fantasy or hard sci-fi. That is one reason why the texts chosen, though containing some supernatural elements, happen in a world that is a mirror image of our own, albeit an historical one, reducing the mimetic gap.

In prose fiction, the *mimetic gap* refers to the inherent difference between the world depicted within the narrative and the real world experienced by the reader. While fiction can imitate reality – mimesis – it can never fully replicate it. The gap becomes evident in the narrative when events or speech deviate from what readers can truly believe could happen. Such deviations are not mere inconsistencies but are integral to the storytelling, as they highlight the artifice of fiction and engage readers in a deeper reflection on the nature of

⁹ *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991, p. 51

¹⁰ Prichard, Caradog, *One Moonlit Night* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd, 2015)

representation and reality. This recognition allows readers to appreciate the narrative's structure and the author's craft, acknowledging that while the story may not mirror reality precisely, it offers a meaningful and intentional representation of it.¹¹

Is my *dérive* still a *dérive* and should it be called such? There are certain core values of Debord's urban *dérive* which are shared by my own rural *dérive*. Specifically, being drawn by attractions in the terrain, discouraged entry and exit from certain zones and chiefly, the encounters found on the *dérive*, which are dictated by key events and locations/landmarks in the text.

A reader must walk a path laid out in the narrative of a given text guided by the writer and the physical features of the landscape. This path can vary in levels of detail depending on the story and the landscape. Here we can apply further techniques to either develop a path where there is not one in such detail or conversely try to follow a strict set of footsteps.

The rural *dérive* augments both the fiction and the landscape in the mind of the reader. A greater understanding of the location in which the fiction is set is achieved by visiting the site – breathing the air, walking the footsteps of the character and exploring the landscape as they would have done, on foot. Equally, passages of text describing the landscape no longer have to rely on imagination to make them come to life in the mind of the reader. Memory of the text is linked to tangible experiences felt by each of the senses when on location and thus we can revisit the events depicted in the text but in our reality. This reciprocal, cyclical practice will elevate: the retrospective experience of reading the source text, or any future

¹¹ Matthew Potolsky, 'The Mimetic Turn: Verisimilitude, a Reintroduction', paper presented at the Final International Conference on Homo Mimeticus, KU Leuven, Belgium, 20–22 April 2022, <https://hiw.kuleuven.be/hua/events/conferences-workshops/mimetic-turn/abstracts> [Accessed 18th September 2025]

visits to the specific location and preferably, both. It is necessary therefore to have the source text be both familiar and fresh in one's mind.

This reciprocal augmentation is accomplished by taking a literal definition of psychogeography and the *dérive* and applying it as practice. The most basic definition of the term, psychogeography, as defined by Debord, 'the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals¹².' This definition, specifically, the 'geographical environment...' and 'consciously organised or not,' is something to which I will return. Then, understanding the results/findings of the *dérive* through the lens of hauntology.

A definition to which I will return and one which is essential to Figure 1 on the first page is the origin of term hauntology, in Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*¹³

Repetition *and* first time: this is perhaps the question of the event as question of the ghost...Repetition and first time but also repetition and last time, since the singularity of any first time makes of it also a last time. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the end of history. Let us call it a *hauntology*. This logic of haunting would not be merely larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being (of the "to be," assuming that it is a matter of Being in the "to be or not to be," but nothing is less certain). It would harbour within itself, but like circumscribed places or particular effects, eschatology and teleology themselves. It would *comprehend* them, but incomprehensibly. (p.10)

Our present is endlessly haunted by the spectres of unresolved pasts and lost futures. Given that the two subjects, psychogeography and hauntology are so closely linked when combined fully they can be used for understanding location, history and experience, experience of a living breathing person retracing the steps of a fictional character and what this journey unfolds for that living reader. I return then to the definition of Hauntogeography as given earlier: the confluence of psychogeography and hauntology, a study of the

¹² Debord, Guy *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography* [Online]
<<http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/2>> [Accessed 22nd January 2023]

¹³ Derrida, Jacques, *Spectres of Marx* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006)

juxtaposition of character and landscape where one haunts the other and vice versa. We can think then, of Hauntogeography as the temporal and spectral aspects of hauntology meeting with the spatial and psychological aspects of psychogeography. A physical environment is layered, with various influences – depending on the place – leaving their mark: industrial decline, cultural conflict, stories of people within that place and as a result, place stores time. The spectres of time, ghosts both of future and past, are experienced by people moving through that space. The aim of Hauntogeography is to filter these ghosts of place into the ones from a familiar story but we must also accept the knowledge that we may also bump into ghosts of the past and of the lost future.

Location choices of the rural *dérive* are provided by specific texts. The result, as stated above, is the elevation of understanding of the text – readers have a stronger connection to the places described and visited by characters and in turn they have a clearer understanding of those locations. In turn, having reduced the mimetic gap, they will be closer to certain elements of the character, specifically, how that environment influenced them.

Although we psychogeographers are all disciples of Guy Debord and those rollicking Situationists who tottered, soused, across the stage set of 1960s Paris, thereby hoping to tear down the scenery of the Society of the Spectacle with their devilish *dérive*, there are still profound differences between us. While we all want to unpick this conundrum, the manner in which the contemporary world warps the relationship between psyche and place, the ways in which we go about the task, are various.¹⁴

Turning to contemporary psychogeographer, Will Self, for the above quote, the ‘profound differences’ between psychogeographers indicate that contemporary psychogeography is not homogenous in practice and ‘the ways in which we go about the task, are various’: therefore, my rural literary *dérive* is every bit as valid within the broad church of psychogeographic practice.

¹⁴ Self, Will *Psychogeography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007)

There are challenges to applying this methodology to a rural space. For example, there are few buildings to avoid. However, there will doubtless be geographical features that cannot be traversed, or where a path of least resistance around an obstacle can be taken. A person might have to avoid a cliff face, a densely wooded area, or a river with a strong current. These natural features discourage entry and paths must be found to walk around them. In turn, people are drawn to the sublime aspects of rurality; pastoral scenes, flora and fauna which is absent in urban areas, greenery and space in which one can feel free from the confines of urban life.

When you are aware of a few specific landmarks, due to their mention in a text – for example, a lake and a lane leading away from the village as used in *One Moonlit Night*¹⁵ – you will have to navigate between them using fiction as a guide, the prose becomes a map. This method affords moments of reflection upon both text and landscape which may otherwise be overlooked or misunderstood. The reader's experience is drawn closer to the author's evocation of a landscape by virtue of physically standing in the space where the story is set. The confluence afforded by Hauntogeography aims to be palpable to all, whether you are someone who feels at home in the countryside or not. Even if you are used to urban life and maybe feel more vulnerable in a rural setting the rural *dérive*, with text and location working in tandem, will augment both. The psychogeography will be in the silence (compared to a city) and the communion that the human body has with its surroundings, feeling the breeze or rain on your skin, breathing heavily from cresting a hill and feeling either awe or terror at the open spaces before you. The hauntological aspects lie in the absence, what isn't there, the community or industry that may be left behind and the promises of a future which died with it. The hauntogeographical is the simultaneous feeling of

¹⁵ Prichard, Caradog, *One Moonlit Night* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd, 2015)

otherness and belonging that these sensations and realisations give to you – it is eerie and it is familiar.

The concept of hauntology has, at least in recent years, applied to music and cinema, rather than works of prose fiction, but it is an essential tenet of my methodology – much of the ‘haunt’ of hauntogeography – here given the repetitive, reciprocal nature of the relationship between understanding the text and walking the landscape. The application in our chosen field – literature – makes a definition more challenging to identify.

In a *Film Quarterly* article titled, ‘What is Hauntology?’, Mark Fisher states, ‘Hauntology itself can be thought of as fundamentally about forces which act at a distance – that which to use Slavoj Žižek’s distinction, insists (has causal effects) without (physically) existing.’¹⁶

While this definition regards a cultural interpretation of hauntology, it also accurately conveys part of the effect of the rural *dérive*. The stories that I have chosen for this research are fictional, the people featured do not exist. Yet the character’s actions guide me to follow, in this instance the causal effect is that I go where they go, or at least, I try. Likewise, the landscape itself has literary ghosts wandering through it, imagined beings that, despite their lack of physical existence, cause people to visit places with fictional beings in mind.

The reciprocal nature of my methodology and the account of my *dérives* act as not only psychogeography as practice but also hauntology, the confluence of the two, thus the term, Hauntogeography. My *dérives* through a narrative have a causal effect on me despite my lack of existence within the narrative, even though I insert myself there.

¹⁶ Fisher, Mark, *Film Quarterly What is Hauntology?* [Online]
<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/fq.2012.66.1.16>> [Accessed 18th March 2023]

Derrida's definition of hauntology fits this process of consuming the text and then walking the narrative. The 'first time' is where the story exists in the author's imagination, which is then repeated through the author's description and representation in the text. As the reader engages with the author's interpretation, repetition begins. There are multiple individual interpretations of the text, unique to each reader. If the author was writing about a place that can be visited, for example, Llanthony Priory as written about by L.T.C Rolt, then the reader can return to the geographical origin of Rolt's inspiration, the location that inspired that first time.

The features or landmarks in our reality act as a fixed point with which to orientate ourselves back and forth between the fiction and our reality. Between these points the rural *dérive* drifts, dipping in and out of the two, occasionally becoming lost before something recognisable from the text or our world can act as a guide. The reader engages with these locations specifically through the character, it is their footsteps the reader traces. First time and repetition. The journey itself, the *dérive*, becomes its own text, a unique narrative which blends elements of fiction and non-fiction and where personal sensory experiences meet historical research.

This confluence of experiences was particularly evident for me during a *dérive* I undertook using this practice, when I strayed off the beaten path in Llanthony and I felt, due to the features of the landscape – the tree coverage, the sudden darkness, the specific date I chose to visit – that I truly was retracing the footsteps of Carfax, the protagonist, and I distinctly remember thinking, this is where it happened, this is how it could have felt. This was likely enhanced due to the lack of a group or people in general during my visit, in allowing me to experience this through the author's interpretation only, unsullied by the perspective of anyone else.

In *The Old Ways: A Journey On Foot*¹⁷, Robert Macfarlane summarises the appeal and allure of this research as practice. Here he is outlining the reasoning behind the writing and research. But my interpretation of it is as a useful explanation for the attraction toward walking a journey detailed in fiction and subsequently the process of seeing the two worlds collide before you. Then, you walk as though on a balance beam between disparate realities.

‘Paths and their markers have long worked on me like lures: drawing my sight up and on and over. The eye is enticed by a path, and the mind’s eye also. The imagination cannot help but pursue a line in the land – onwards in space, but also backwards in time to the histories of a route and its previous followers. As I walk paths I often wonder about their origins, the impulses that have led to their creation, the records they yield of customary journeys, and the secrets they keep of adventures, meetings and departures.’ (p.15)¹⁸

¹⁷ Macfarlane, Robert, *The Old Ways: A Journey On Foot* (London: Penguin Books, 2013)

¹⁸ Macfarlane, *The Old Ways* (2013)

2 Choice of Texts

The choice of texts for this research was based on wanting to explore texts which were set in rural Wales, specifically locations which I am not overly familiar, in which the landscape is deeply interwoven with the main character. I posit that the creative project, *Restless*, is a work of literary fantasy. Rather than treating fantasy as something which is solely defined by the presence of supernatural or impossible elements, fantasy can be understood not as a fixed set of generic conventions but a mode capable of appearing in different forms and contexts. Put simply, it often presents something which cannot be true yet it is.

Farah Mendlesohn's approach to fantasy in, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*¹⁹ is useful here because it considers not simply what constitutes the fantasy genre, but the relationship between the fantastic, the narrative and the reader. She asks, “Where are we (the reader) asked to stand in relationship to the fantastic?”²⁰ *Restless* is fantasy because it introduces supernatural conditions – ghosts and uncanny physical structures – to an otherwise recognisable world. The ghosts in *Restless* exist, they have relationships with the living and the boundaries between life and death are explored and defined. However, the supernatural is not used just to create an alternative world separate from our reality, the landscapes of *Restless* are rooted in rural Wales and later in the novel, the Outer Hebrides and the themes explored in the novel closely map onto issues encountered in real life. These supernatural elements allow a real discussion and exploration of relationships between landscape and memory, social cohesion, class and belonging which might otherwise be difficult for me to articulate if not through the use of genre. The fantastic is therefore something through which these themes can be experienced.

¹⁹ Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008)

²⁰ Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* p. xviii.

However, I deliberately moved away from fantasy in choosing my texts for this critical report – though each text could itself claim to have elements of the fantastic, each text is not itself at home in the genre of fantasy. This is not because fantasy is incompatible with Hauntogeography, far from it, but because if I were to rely solely on fantasy texts then I would risk making the relationship between choice of texts and my creative project predetermined. If Hauntogeography is to function as a meaningful methodology, then it must be capable of operating outside the genre of the creative work from which it originated. It could be applied to any genre and work of fiction.

I wanted to avoid the use of anything specifically in the genre of fantasy, like *The Owl Service*, and keep my focus on prose fiction therefore not using something like *Under Milk Wood*. Each of the texts I am focussing on offers a different interpretation of the landscape and character. In the first, Cwm Garon, a visitor encounters a hostile environment and territory. In *Sheepshagger*, the main character, Ianto is in many ways a manifestation of the landscape, he and it are inseparable. In *One Moonlit Night*, in chapter 8 we hear from the point of view of the landscape and see how it dictates the emotional state of the unnamed narrator.

The aim of the rural literary *dérive* is a deliberate attempt to transform the conscious state, like a guided meditation on both the story and the place in which it is set. I call this effect, the waking lucid dream. A portion of the preparation for this is in the reading itself, this is akin to the lucid dreamer being aware that they are in a dream. In much the same way that a reader is aware that they are reading but they continue, deliberately to meet the author's vision in the realm of their imagination. Instead, our reality becomes the dreamscape and the person undertaking the *dérive* is drawn by the coincidences they happen upon, locations which traverse both worlds, and they achieve a state of synthesis: the waking lucid dream.

‘When the sleeper awakens from a dream, he believes he has really somehow been away, or that other people have come to him. As it is well known by experience that men’s bodies do not go on these excursions, the natural explanation is that every man’s living self or soul is his phantom or image, which can go out of his body and see and be seen itself in dreams.’ p. 36²¹

The above quote, from anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917) perfectly summarises my experience when reading fiction, and in turn explains the waking lucid dream that I aim to achieve with my dérives. When reading a story, one in which the reader is truly engaged, they will mourn the loss of a character and feel the emotional stakes of a story.

This is fundamentally inseparable from Alan Moore’s claim that writing is magic. In writing a story, the writer has cast a spell. This, I posit, is an essential way to think about what fiction does to our consciousness and thus our perceived reality. Readers are enchanted by the work of a magician/writer and my dérive takes that enchantment or spell one step further.

‘Writing has been, and will always be, our foremost means of modifying human consciousness. You are modifying the consciousness of the reader and therefore you are modifying the reality of the reader. Writing will modify the reality and the consciousness of the entire species and, inevitably, will mean modifying the consciousness of the writer themselves.’ ²² Alan Moore BBC Masterclass.

The reader uses their imagination to connect with the text. This could be imagining a landscape described by a writer. The writer’s spell is cast; the reader is imagining their own version of the writer’s vision. It all takes place within the reader’s head. But what happens if we were to take this further? You could argue that I have been so enchanted by the work of the writers I have looked at, that I needed to seek places to bridge the gap between worlds. My reality has forever been altered. The locations visited for my dérives are completely

²¹ Brady, Bernadette and Jack Hunter (eds), *Sacred Geography: Conversations with Place* (Lampeter: Sophia Centre Press, 2024)

²² Alan Moore, *Alan Moore’s Writing Masterclass*, BBC Four, broadcast 15 March 2013, <https://www.bbcmastro.com/courses/alan-moore/storytelling/lessons/writing-as-enchantment?autoplay=true#lesson-player> [Accessed 04 July 2023]

interwoven with events mentioned in works of fiction. When walking alone, I cannot tell where reality begins and where it ends.

3 Steps Toward a Dérive

The past influences the present the same is true with the hauntogeographical dérive. This is why it is essential to read the source text before you are in the specific location. The fiction then and the reading thereof becomes part of the reader's past, during their visit to a place they are influenced, even in the most subtle way, by the knowledge gained by reading the source text.

'British writer Alan Moore understands the arts to be deeply intertwined with occultism, by which he means a particular worldview that asserts that the physical world accessible to the senses is surrounded by and infused with another invisible world [*occultus* is Latin for "hidden"] seemingly inhabited by a whole host of subtle beings and daimonic creatures.'²³

The above quote further describing Moore's view contains the interesting fact that *occultus* is Latin for hidden. Naturally, to suggest that something is hidden is to simultaneously suggest that it could be found. Or, for the purposes of my research methodology, found and then experienced.

²³ Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 6.

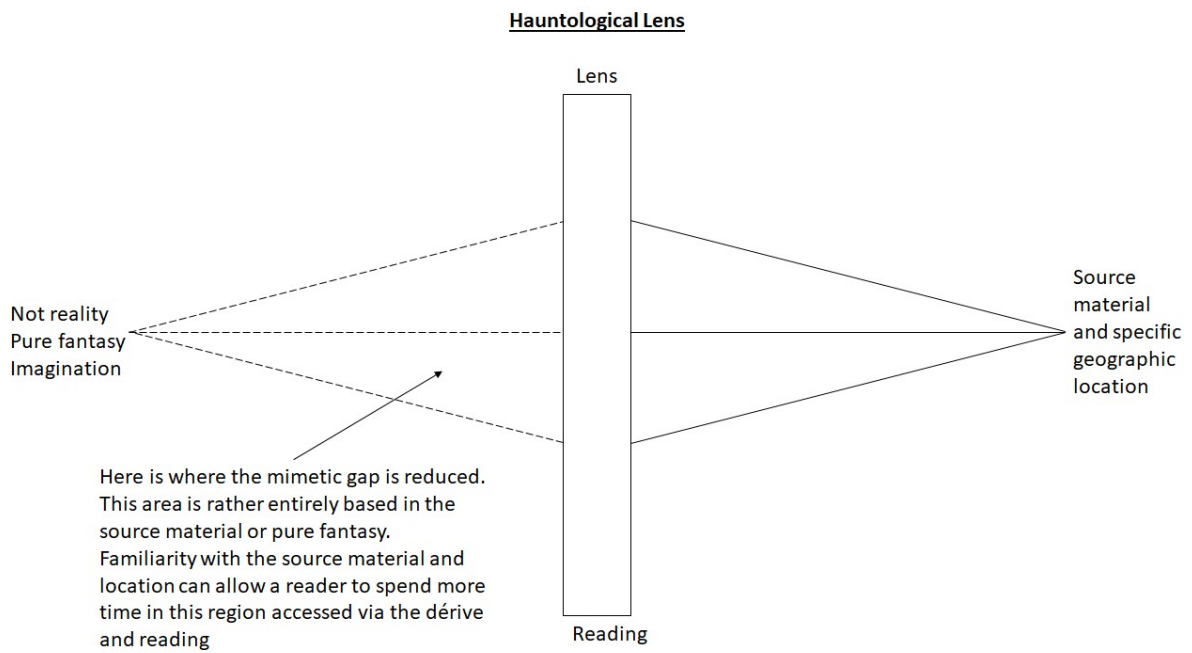


Figure 2: The Hauntological lens

I will first analyse the source texts through a hauntological lens before undertaking the *dérive*.

Chapter Two: Cwm Garon by L.T.C Rolt

1 Text Analysis

L.T.C Rolt's folk horror story, *Cwm Garon*, from his short story collection, *Sleep No More* is about a hill-walker named Carfax who goes on holiday in the Black Mountains in Bannau Brycheiniog. He stays in a ruined priory with an inn attached to it where he meets Elphinstone, who describes the influence that this unique place holds over visitors. Carfax experiences an unsettling feeling seemingly coming from the hills themselves and later encounters ancient forces which hold a power over the locals. Elphinstone leaves to investigate further and meets his end. Despite this, after Carfax returns to London, he feels compelled to return to Cwm Garon and he suffers an uncertain fate.

Rolt quickly focusses on the countryside in Cwm Garon. Within the first two pages of this story, the background of the protagonist, Carfax, and his wish to leave the urban behind is clearly established. 'After a long winter spent in the fog and grime of London, this Welsh Borderland was balm to the eye. Spring had only just touched the soot-blackened trees in the squares with the lightest film of green, but here she had already run riot, dressing the whole countryside in fresh splendour.' (p. 33) ²⁴

The journey and sentiments felt by Carfax suggest a passage over the border, not just from one nation to another but from civilisation to a more simplistic, pastoral way of life. Already there is a subtle recognition that his route of escape back to everything he knows – the fog and grime of London – is rapidly receding through the trees.

The mere mention of London in this opening sentence calls upon the reader's image of the city, whatever that may be, and provides crucial details for Carfax's cognitive map.

²⁴ Rolt, *Cwm Garon*, *Sleep No More* pp.33.

Though Carfax's London is radically different than the image conjured up by the contemporary reader. This was 1940s London a soot-blackened and recently heavily bombed place. Carfax was likely escaping an overcrowded, smoggy city, which still had The Blitz fresh in the memory of its inhabitants. Yet this is also a man who can afford to holiday at such a time so it is probably safe to assume there is an element of privilege to him.

Sometimes, even today, rural spaces can be seen as a playground for the middle class and that people who inhabit rural spaces are themselves middle class. This is of course a harmful oversimplification which actively erases the rural working-class experience. Being a city dweller and given his later encounters with the ancient and the pagan, Carfax represents the enlightened man. A knowledgeable modern man who almost immediately upon leaving the train behind finds himself adrift in an atmosphere he doesn't understand and a landscape he has no way of understanding. Suddenly, he is at the whim of ancient pagan forces that the enlightenment should have stamped out. However, these phantom enemies have not been fully conquered, God, superstition and faith survived and thrive. This is an ancient landscape and Carfax confronts that past in the shadow of the hills which surround him.

The mention of London also places the descriptions of the countryside shortly afterwards in contrast with this image. Carfax is travelling from one to the other, watching as it passes by the train window. Rolt also begins to describe the countryside in a pastoral way. In this context, the pastoral being a romantic construction, an artificial perception of beautiful green hills, bouncing lambs and spring bouncing out of every view. This perception is itself a phantom of sorts, 'balm to the eye' and 'in fresh splendour' are typical and perhaps even bordering on cliché when it comes to describing a rural scene or area. However, this idea is soon subverted and challenged as a sinister nature creeps in. The landscape's tonal shift is apparent as the train enters the station.

As it did so, the carriage window framed a picture which made Carfax start and catch his breath in wonder, so startling was it in its wild grandeur after looking so long on the smooth fields and hills of England. A towering mountain wall had suddenly arisen to enclose the whole western horizon, and to dominate and dwarf the familiar landscape of the foreground. Seen thus against the westering light of late afternoon, the shadowed face of this great massif presented so marked a contrast to the sunlit levels below as to seem unreal and as menacing as a thunder-cloud. So impenetrable was the shadow on the mountain that its contours were invisible, and the long, level line of the ridge, sharply etched across the sky's brightness, appeared to mark the lip of a precipice the height of which seemed monstrously magnified. (pp. 33-34).²⁵

Rolt's choice of words here is particularly interesting as 'grandeur' – suggesting sublimity – gives way to 'menacing', impenetrable shadows and finally, 'monstrously magnified'. The reader is immediately aware, even if reading this story as a standalone and not part of the collection, that something unpleasant lurks behind the towering mountain wall. This is especially important given how early the pastoral image of the countryside is challenged.

Carfax's response to nature, as described by Rolt, portrays an experience of the Sublime. Specifically, the passion caused by the sublime as described by Edmund Burke: 'The passion caused by the sublime in *nature*, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror.' (p.47).²⁶ Nature then, in this instance, is an example of a 'pleasing terror' something which Burke later recalls, stating, 'Whatever therefore is terrible, with regards to sight, is sublime too.' (p.47).²⁷ Furthermore, 'Greatness of dimension, is a powerful cause of the sublime.' Cwm Garon, being a valley, is surrounded by tall hills, in this case mountains, sometimes grouped together as a massif, on both sides. The high mountain walls are sometimes cloaked in weather which amplifies their size and the command they hold over Carfax. This captivation of terror in landscape has a magnetic pull

²⁵ Rolt, Cwm Garon, *Sleep No More* pp. 33-34.

²⁶ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) p. 47.

²⁷ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, p. 47.

on the characters navigating through it. This is discussed by the characters later in the text and the strong pull is what draws Carfax onward though the descriptions, imagery and feeling strongly suggest that he should do the opposite. He is leaving behind everything he knows and pushing onward into a green unknown because of this sublime aspect of Cwm Garon. The tension in Carfax explored here is hauntological in nature as although he routinely encounters hostility in the atmosphere and in the people he sees, apart from Elphinstone, he can't help but be drawn along by the sublime aspect of his surroundings as he was when he first set foot in the valley.

This is all in spite of Carfax's inability to read the landscape. Being from London in the 1940s and possessing the means to support a holiday in the Black Mountains, it is safe to assume that Carfax is an urban, modern figure. This is ascertained from his emotional reaction and responses to the landscape. He is not at all used to the countryside let alone this particular area of rural Wales. Though he is safely able to navigate through the strange and foreign land, he feels increasingly uncomfortable and uneasy. But still, he does not turn back when he initially confronts this feeling and presses on, drawn by the sublime aspect of his surroundings. The magnetic aspect of this passion Burke described as '[...] the great power of the sublime [...] it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force.' (p. 47).²⁸ Given that Burke thought that nature is the one of most sublime object, it is not at all surprising to consider that Carfax is at the mercy of his own 'astonishment' as dictated by the landscape because, 'Astonishment [...] is the effect of the sublime in the highest degree' (p. 47).²⁹

The sudden coming of the mist brought with it a feeling of utter isolation, intensifying the loneliness he had felt when he left the station. It seemed to mark a further stage in some inexorable progress designed deliberately to cut him off from the familiar

²⁸ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful*, p. 47

²⁹ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful*, p. 47

world of his fellow-men. Sole occupant of a minute island of mountain turf, heather and whinberry, that familiar world already seemed incredibly remote. (p. 35).³⁰

This is not at all the idyllic scene Carfax likely pictured and hoped for on his journey from London. In his first taste of true wilderness a, ‘minute island of mountain turf,’ he is truly disconnected from the world as described in the opening paragraphs and is connecting here into something he does not yet understand. He has begun to feel the specific effects of the landscape, a kind of spatial intimidation, due to a lack of a cognitive map. Today’s traveller is able to get a greater understanding of what it is like on the ground of their chosen destination. They can use Google Maps to scope out the area, there may also be people who have vlogged the specific walk/other activity on Youtube and these resources will offer a degree of preparation. But what they lack is that personal connection made through experiencing sensory detail which can only be felt and lived.

Carfax knows he must push on to his destination, a bed in a warm room, though he no doubt began to question his choice of retreat. Drawn on by the astonishment he experiences from Cwm Garon, Carfax presses on. And while ‘utter isolation’ might have positive connotations for some, ‘loneliness’ can only be seen, in this context, as negative. Worse still, he is walking into this landscape which seems to only want the worst for him and to imbue him with negative experiences. He cannot read the landscape, and though he is able to navigate it safely, he has no cognitive map, no understanding of the area built up from previous visits. Assuming he researched his trip, he may have read about the area yet such scant knowledge is soon engulfed by clouds passing overhead and the Black Mountains taking on the colour of their name. Yet, at the very least he has an idea of where he is in the country, which might be comforting, but then he is also in the grip of a giant hand comprising of hills and valleys. He is already feeling the magnetic pull of Cwm Garon even though he

³⁰ Rolt, Cwm Garon, *Sleep No More* p. 35

would, at this moment in the story, say that he is driven by a need to reach the inn before nightfall, he later learns that there is more to his urgency.

Shortly after this Carfax is confronted with the site of a previous victim of these hills.

Immediately beyond the pass, the track skirted a mawne pit, a hole from which peats had once been dug, but which had now become a quagmire ringed by livid green moss and tufted cotton-grass. A luckless mountain pony had evidently floundered into it at some time and, unable to extricate itself, had perished miserably. Now that ravens, crows and mountain foxes had done their work, all that remained was a skeleton of whitened bones wrapped in the hide as in a winding-sheet. (pp. 35-36).³¹

Within the short story, this is one of the first instances of nature swallowing or consuming something. This is a motif to which Rolt returns. At first this could be seen as the brutal reality of nature rather than the artificial image depicted by a pastoral painting or photograph. It is a particularly gruesome image and yet more proof for Carfax that the idea of a holiday in the countryside and the reality are two disparate things. Later though, there are more instances of something confronting nature and ultimately losing in the form of ruins. The image of a pony's skeleton wrapped in a winding sheet is not an accidental premonition. This carefully crafted image of death bodes poorly for Carfax and any other outsiders to this land that he encounters. In particular, the use of 'winding-sheet' this is a corpse ready for burial, with all of the dignity that the brutality of nature can muster.

Nature then, it seems, has agency here. Certainly, through Carfax's interpretation of the scenes he uncovers as he makes his way to the inn.

³¹ Rolt, Cwm Garon, *Sleep No More* pp. 35-36.

2 Llanthony Priory Dérive

Carfax alighted the train at Pont Newydd/New Bridge station having travelled from London. I pass the site of the former train station in the car. The railway line still runs alongside the road but the station, like so many, is no more – thanks to Dr Beeching’s Axe³². Despite being a bank holiday, the road is quiet. Most people opt for more accessible and less obscure haunts. Thick traffic, the likes of which is completely alien to Carfax, is left in the rearview mirror when I make the final twists through Llanthony onto the ancient single-track lane towards the priory. Carfax would have made two changes on his journey from London whereas I drove from my childhood home of Llanfair Caereinion, which took just over two hours. Driving north to south or vice versa in Wales is notoriously difficult. Decades of poor investment in infrastructure and a constant battle with the terrain make for a time-consuming journey. Some would argue that a little over two hours on a motorway is tedious, almost boring. But on mountainous roads in Mid-Wales, constant twists and turns, gear changing, climbing and descending, make you feel every minute of the journey. I park the car in an adjacent field, an overspill from the main carpark, in the sun. Arriving by daylight I completely forget Carfax’s struggle of walking from the station to the priory in the dark. He needed rest and recuperation at the inn.

L.T.C Rolt (1910-1974) was not known in his lifetime as a writer of fiction. He is remembered for his travel writing, specifically, *Narrowboat*³³ and his biographies of Industrial Revolution titans, Isambard Kingdom Brunel³⁴ and Thomas Telford³⁵. He is considered a pioneer in using the canals for leisure purposes and in the world of railway

³² Christian Wolmar, *Fire and Steam: A New History of the Railways in Britain* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007), p. 285

³³ L.T.C Rolt: *Narrowboat* (Stroud: The History Press, 2009).

³⁴ *Isambard Kingdom Brunel The Definitive Biography of the Engineer, Visionary and Great Briton* (London: Penguin, 1990).

³⁵ *Thomas Telford* (Stroud: The History Press. 2007).

preservation – a locomotive at the world’s first preserved railway, Talyllyn Railway, bears his name. However, a slim volume of fiction lies in his bibliography, *Sleep No More*³⁶, a little-known collection of ghost stories.

Rolt, like many who admire the British ghost story, was well aware of the shadow of M. R. James. In the introduction to *Sleep No More* Susan Hill states: ‘he was an admirer of the great M. R. James and it shows, but he is also and firmly his own man; these are not derivative imitations.’(p. x)³⁷ Furthering this, I argue that the differences in their work outnumber the similarities. Rolt rarely uses an educated protagonist encountering something outside of their knowledge and experience, something of a trope in James’ stories, for example the professor in ‘Oh Whistle and I’ll Come to You My Lad’³⁸. Rather, Rolt has the reader observe, from a safe distance, the creeping dread into which his protagonist wanders and is then often powerless to survive. However, as I ponder the nature of Rolt’s writing and how he creates atmosphere in his pages, I remind myself that I am no longer at a safe distance.

Cwm Garon has many lengthy descriptions of the landscape and a character, Carfax, moving through it on foot. Much of the haunting comes from Carfax’s engagement with the rural environment which seems hostile to him at every turn. Carfax’s walking holiday, much of which takes place on April 30th, results in a discovery of an ancient, Pagan evil. Holidaying in a village just over the England-Wales border seems a simple premise, as Carfax’s lone figure heading away from the train station and into the wilderness confirms. He is here to walk, attracted seemingly by the isolation which he immediately and brutally

³⁶ *Sleep No More Railway, Canal & Other Stories of the SUPERNATURAL* (Stroud: The History Press, 2013).

³⁷ *Sleep No More Railway* (Stroud: The History Press, 2013) Introduction by Susan Hill, p. x.

³⁸ M. R. James *The Ghost Stories of M. R. James* (London: British Library Publishing, 2018).

confronts when the darkness of an empty rurality at night swallows him en route to the priory.

Carfax doubtless had little option but to arrive in the early evening, walking through a small cloud of steam and out of the station. Despite my much earlier arrival time, Carfax is always ahead. Our steps, though occasionally in sync, will sometimes slip out of time and I will have to allow myself to be drawn by certain psychic lighthouses, the geographical markers with which to align myself with either the story/Cwm Garon or our reality/Llanthony. He is always a little way ahead. I do my best to follow his shadow and will doubtless glimpse him here and there, our paths crossing between respective journeys. This marks the beginning of our Möbius Strip walk together. Hauntogeographic practice is cyclical and could be compared to the Möbius strip, which is ‘a one-sided surface that can be constructed by affixing the ends of a rectangular strip after first having given one of the ends a one-half twist. This space exhibits interesting properties, such as having only one side and remaining in one piece when split down the middle.’³⁹

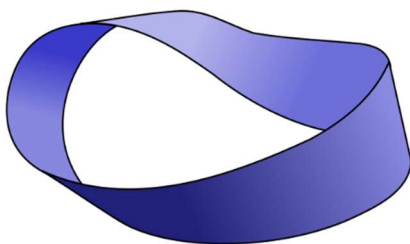


Fig. 3: “Möbius strip”, vector illustration, SVG graphic, FreeSVG.org (Public Domain)

³⁹ Adam Augustyn, Encyclopaedia Britannica *Möbius Strip Definition*
<https://www.britannica.com/science/Möbius-strip> [Accessed 14th September 2024]

When I affix one end of the strip – reading – to the other – visiting – I can lose myself in the subsequent twist and create the lucid waking dream. My experience has already begun to blend into his so much so that I am not in Llanthony Priory, rather, Cwm Garon and likewise Carfax’s shadow lingers over this place and if you are tuned in to the correct, subtle signals and listen carefully, you can hear his footsteps.

The land here is formed like a hand outstretched on a table and Carfax unknowingly walks straight into its grip. He quickly discovers that the valley in which the village resides is a hostile landscape. The few villagers he encounters are unwelcoming too and we eventually learn that they did not leave ancient pagan practices behind. Cwm Garon expertly drifts between different atmospheres, conjuring up images of pastoral villages to barren mountain tops and finally, a hellish demonic congregation and worship.

Despite his destination, the priory, being relatively close to civilisation – in the form of a few towns – as the crow flies, thanks to the geography, it is isolated. ‘truly suited to the monastic life... in a wilderness far removed from the bustle of mankind.’ Giraldus Cambrensis, Gerald of Wales a 12th century traveller⁴⁰. Those words are as true today as they were in the 12th century, as advertised by the Priory’s website, ‘No televisions in the rooms; no mobile phone signal. Completely switch off from the rest of the world in beautiful surroundings.’⁴¹ Carfax and I do not share a room. Although we differed on our methods of arrival the attraction of a meal and some relaxation in the lounge is shared.

In the lounge I make do with some light reading, though I can’t help but eavesdrop on the conversations. Between words concerning the nature of the path from Hatterall, and others resorting to discussing the various merits of their chosen dinner, there is a distinct though faint snoring. Carfax was sleeping off the effects of his walk from the train, ushered

⁴⁰ Llanthony Priory, <<https://www.llanthonypriory.co.uk/>> [Accessed on 30th April 2022]

⁴¹ Llanthony Priory, <<https://www.llanthonypriory.co.uk/>> [Accessed on 30th April 2022]

gently into sleep by a generous meal. I have to imagine that at some point his dreaming mind would summon the image of a pony's skeleton wrapped in the winding-sheet hide that he passed on his way.

In the opposite corner of the room, busily scribbling away, is Charles Elphinstone. He seemingly doesn't notice anything or anyone around him, so engrossed in his texts that he will not entertain distractions from his own reality, let alone mine. I envy this and so too does Carfax. I feel the pressure of my own work weighing on me. The sight of his intent and focussed face and his pen racing across the page taunts me into realising just how much I have to do. Elphinstone and his work ethic fade away as another guest walks in front of him and takes his seat. I was less fortunate in that there was more than one other guest accompanying me in the inn that night. We all briefly passed through one another's lives like ghosts walking through walls. I join Carfax at the window to share the view of the ruins reaching up into the night sky. Even though I wasn't blessed with a full moon, I can see from the light on his face that Carfax was and he mutters those lines which first bring him into contact with Elphinstone.

Much of the haunting in this ghost story comes from Carfax's engagement with the environment. There is something in the land itself which unsettles him. From his seat on the train the countryside is draped in pastoral splendour. 'The map lay disregarded on his knees as he watched the moving panorama of hills stippled with April cloud shadows, of neat farms buried in the white mist of fruit orchards, and of rich meadows dotted with sheep or the red cattle of Herefordshire.' The same could easily be said of the view from the car on my drive south. The idyllic is amplified when viewed from the safety of a warm and dry space. Even though a road follows the land more closely than rail – steeper inclines and curves are more easily managed by road – removal from the elements is shared and therefore that immediacy with the landscape is lost. Apart from this initial train journey, Carfax moves through the

landscape exclusively on foot. Rolt's Cwm Garon, though at a glance, fictional and certainly the names have been changed, is entirely real. It took little detective work to discover this place as it is easy to match maps and drawings hanging in the inn to Rolt's descriptions. Can we infer from this that Rolt wanted readers to follow in Carfax's footsteps?

The fictional Cwm Garon (Garon Valley) lies in the not-at-all fictional Black Mountains. The four peaks which make up the easternmost point of the Bannau Brycheiniog/Brecon Beacons in South East Wales are steeped in folklore. There are several stories roaming those hills and valleys, from fairy princesses to Arthurian legend. The short book, *The Enchanted Valley – A Guide to the Myths and Legends of the Llanthony Valley*⁴² details many of the ghosts, hauntings and mythological creatures which roam just this one valley. Given that Cwm Garon lies in the Black Mountains, this affords an opportunity to anthropomorphise the landscape in an interesting way. The exact method is described as follows:

‘The best way of remembering the layout of the Black Mountains is to imagine your right hand placed flat on a table with the fingers spread apart. Your thumb is Crib y Garth, or Cat's Back. Your first finger is Hatterall, your second finger is Ffawyddog, with Bal-Mawr at the knuckle. Your third finger is Allt-Mawr and the nail is Crug Hywel, which gives its name to the town of Crickhowell directly below.’⁴³

Physical understanding of the landscape is much more immediate and tangible with this description and technique and it is mirrored in the text:

‘He took out his map and checked his position. He had reached the central massif of the range. From it, the long ridges stretched southward like the fingers of an outspread hand.

⁴² M.E Warren, *The Enchanted Valley A Guide to the Myths and Legends of the Llanthony Valley* (Lancaster: Foliate Head Press, 2020).

⁴³ Chris Barber, *The Black Mountains Magic* <http://www.blackmountainwalking.co.uk/the-black-mountains-magic> [Accessed 26 March 2022] (para. 3 and 4 of 16).

Between them and to the west lay two valleys, the Llan Fawr and Llan Fechan, running parallel with Cwm Garon.⁴⁴

By matching the description in the narrative to the hand analogy it is safe to assert that the fictional Cwm Garon lies between the index finger – Hatterall – and the middle finger – Bal Mawr/Ffawyddog respectively, see Figure 3:

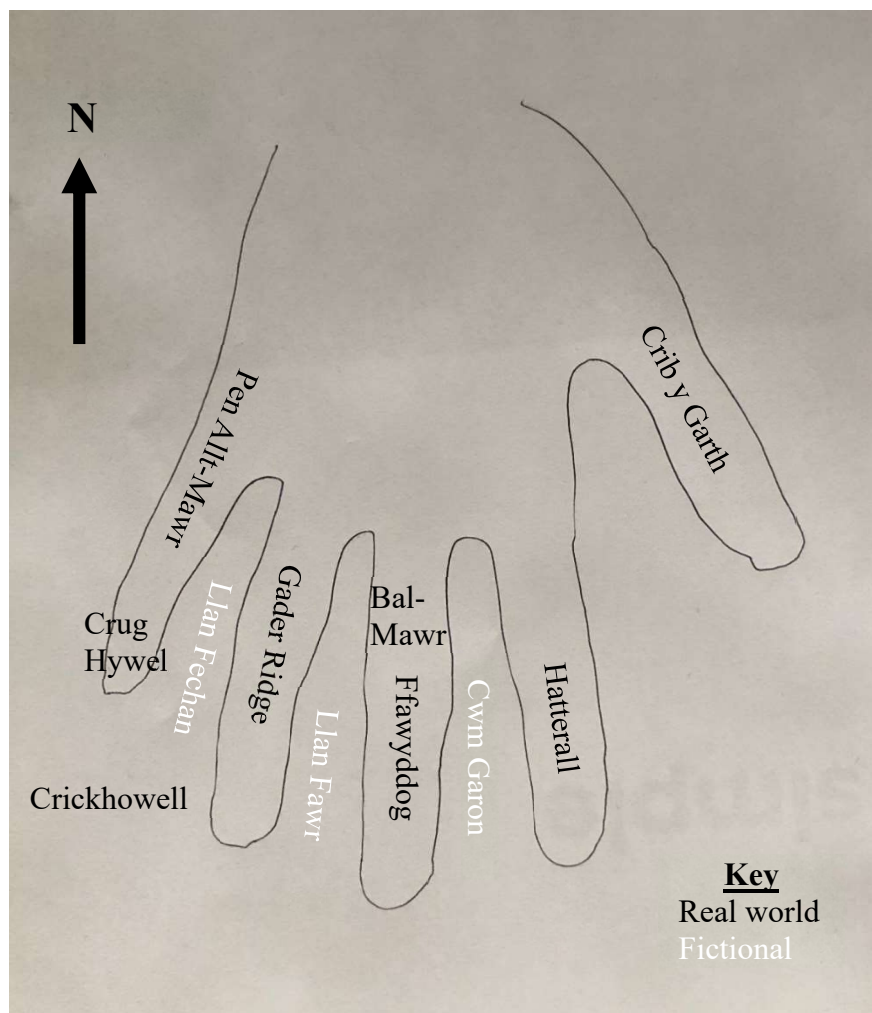


Figure 4: Ridges and Valleys described in Cwm Garon

⁴⁴ Rolt, Cwm Garon, *Sleep No More* pp. 40-41.

Though the town of Crickhowell and some of the surrounding hamlets and villages may have seen some small changes in the eighty years since *Cwm Garon* was published, the rural landscape remains largely unchanged.

Matching the description of the valley, from Carfax's view on the back of the hand as it were, puts the fictional *Cwm Garon* in Llanthony Valley/Vale of Ewyas. So, *Cwm Garon* the village is Llanthony village in southern Powys, a stone's throw from the England-Wales border and *Cwm Garon* the valley is Llanthony Valley itself. Moving forward with this assumption, the similarities in landmarks in the text and Llanthony valley are striking. For example, the inn Carfax visits and stays in:

‘At one point the valley widened into a natural amphitheatre in the centre of which stood the grey shape of a building larger than a mountain farm. This Carfax took to be his destination, the ruined Abbey of Llangaron and its adjoining inn.’⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Rolt, *Cwm Garon*, *Sleep No More* p. 36.



Figure 5: View from Llanthony Priory of the inn



Figure 6: Llanthony Priory

Llanthony Priory is a ruined Augustinian priory with a 3-star hotel, Llanthony Priory Hotel, attached to it. It sits, just as Rolt describes, in a natural amphitheatre and like the rest of the Llanthony Valley, it is surrounded on both sides by steep hills. Even on a bank holiday weekend, it isn't a popular spot due to the relative difficulty in getting there. That much hasn't changed since Rolt's time. There is just one road winding through the Llanthony Valley and it is single lane traffic and was only made navigable for cars in 1960⁴⁶. Interestingly, this means that the route itself remains unchanged from the time of Rolt's writing. This means that only the age of the cars one might see and the walking gear used will be difficult, much of the environmental detail remains the same.

⁴⁶ M.E Warren, *The Enchanted Valley A Guide to the Myths and Legends of the Llanthony Valley* (Lancaster: Foliate Head Press, 2020).

I catch occasional glimpses of Carfax ahead of me. First, after a brief visit to the bar of the Priory Hotel, I head outside and, with my lemonade and peer in through the window to what must be the breakfast room. I just caught the back of Carfax as he left through the door. Clearly, my drink would have to wait if I wanted to catch up with him. The next glimpse came when I'd returned my glass and I left the inn to head towards the monastery. Though there were a series of figures who had just finished a walk on the Dyke, there was a lone figure heading up the road.

Later, when Carfax is exploring Cwm Garon, Rolt states that Carfax walked for an hour to reach a ruined monastery, from the ruined abbey. Rolt states,

'He had been walking for the best part of an hour when he saw on the left of the road what he took to be the ruins of a church. The valley was narrower here, and its walls more precipitous, for the clouds revealed glimpses of naked crags and desolate screes of shattered boulders. As though these features had not already made the site of the church sombre enough, a dense belt of pine-trees had been planted alongside it. This must be Capel Cwm Garon, he reflected, recalling his study of the map during breakfast. He thought he had never seen so gloomy a place, it would seem dark even in sunlight...' ⁴⁷

In the present day, the road winds towards the ruined monastery in Llanthony Valley in the hamlet of Capel-y-Ffin. Rolt's crags and desolate screes are still there today and, in some cases, even more pronounced. Some orange fence netting is all that prevents a walker or a car from falling down a steep drop several feet to the valley floor below. The height of your surroundings, trees, the steep hillsides, is changing all the while. Around each blind corner I just about catch Carfax as he rounds a bend ahead of me. It seems the road is never straight enough to get full sight of him. Often the view is obscured by steep fields to the left and trees and overgrowth to the right.

⁴⁷ Rolt, Cwm Garon, *Sleep No More* p. 40.

I round a sharp, blind corner, which reveals a steep embankment, held back by a hedge, to the left of the road and a slope to the right. Some of fence on the right has given way and a temporary replacement – consisting of a single tightrope-like line of metal wire – suggested a boundary. The next corner, longer and less severe, lies like a balcony on the hillside with thin trees on the valley floor below. The pockmarked tarmac continues and climbs gently until the next sharp corner where a small inviting gate (Figure 6) sits right at the apex of the bend. The gate is clearly much younger than the stonework around it, which explains why I did not hear Carfax shut it when he went through.

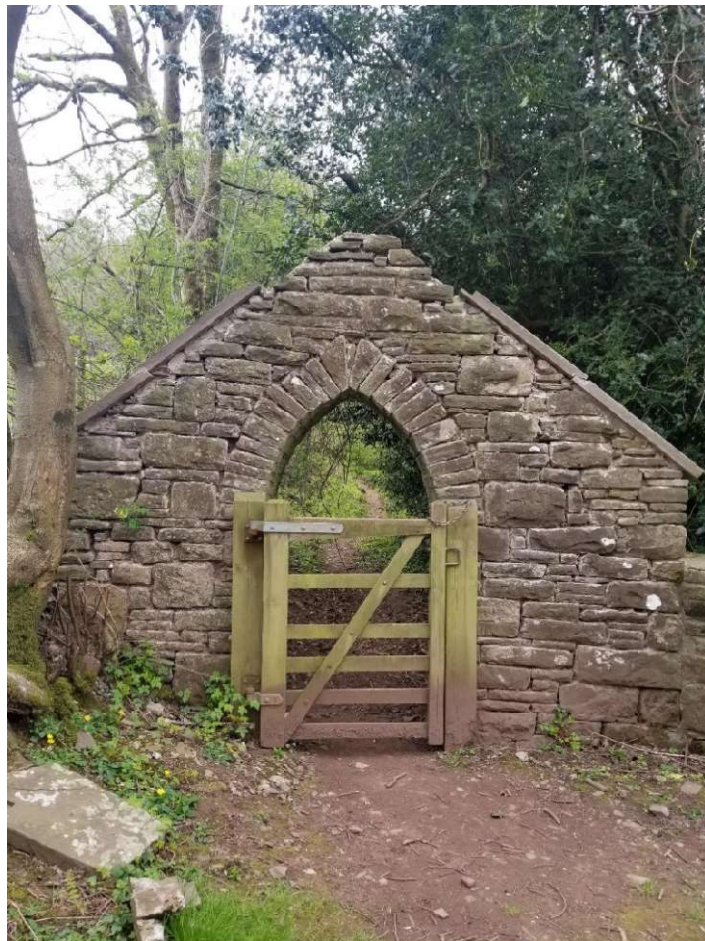


Figure 7: Gate

If I stood here with a torch, late at night and surrounded by darkness it would be much less inviting. Even so, in the light of a bright bank holiday a quiet corner of my mind is aware

that it is the 1st of May, Calan Mai, and surely, if I am to visit the monastery from Cwm Garon, I couldn't have picked a better time. Carfax and Elphinstone were brave to have made this journey in darkness.

The gate opens and the path winds through a natural tunnel formed by overgrown trees and bushes. I have to stoop for the first few metres and despite the time of day it is darker here. I haven't seen many people all day and here I am even more aware of stepping away from society, perhaps this is something that Carfax wanted. The path follows the contours of the hillside and winds through overcast woodland. The earth is dry, there can't have been much rain for a few days. There is a brief moment of brightness, a combination of the sun coming out from behind a cloud and tree canopy – which is never overly thick – thinning to reveal a crude stone bridge. It is only a large stone slab lain across a brook, just wide enough for a person to walk across and only about as long as two or three paces. I estimate the drop at about six feet. I can't help but admire the way the stone sank into the earth, as though it had always been there, like some of the tree roots that briefly poke out of the ground before snaking their way downward. Maybe this is some root or foundation of the monastery reaching out with stony tendrils. The synthesis of the natural and a human influence blending together so well that it is difficult to tell where one begins and the other ends.

The path narrows, with scree-like mounds of dirt on the downhill side, following the contours of the hillside. It begins to climb, gently at first and just as it starts to get much steeper there is a fork. The path to the right, the steepest route, appears much older and very overgrown. There is a suggestion of footsteps leading upwards in a thin string through tangled green. To the left the path curves downhill again, avoiding some particularly large trees. Here there is a small clearing free from any kind of vegetation. It is still dark. The brook trickles around the patch cutting it off into a dry island contrasting with the green and

the water. I linger here for a moment, just to appreciate the stillness. Llanthony Valley is hardly a well-populated area. Rather there are small pockets in the valley's walls where people have carved out a home or a farm. No breeze, no insects or birds, just the brook barely skirting the hillside and rolling on its way to the River Honddu.

The hillside is particularly steep here and trees obscure the summit. There is a rough outline of a path. At least, that is how it looks. Why would the other path, narrow and clearly not well used, just lead to a small dead clearing? I follow this outline in a mostly straight line up the bank. When I reach the top the rear wall of the monastery greets me. The sheer stone face was at once a mute blank slab and a symphony of irregular lineation. No two stones were the same, though higher up the wall there is some evidence of modern or recent repair attempts – a thick steel bolt and comparatively fresh cement. To the left of the monastery is a gate, with a sign which reads, 'Private Property No Trespassers'. I walk right up to the gate, confronting the sign. The gate clearly opened into a well-kept lawn belonging to a private property. I briefly consider ignoring the sign and wandering straight through the gate, so inviting was the lawn and the prospect of being so close to the monastery. But, I turn and trace my path back through the woods. Such is the nature of *dérive*, one must divert their course like the flow of water around a boulder.

When I reach the road again I resolve to walk along it a bit further just to see if a better view could be achieved as Carfax did. The road here is quite straight and even though some of the large trees had been cut down, likely due to storm damage and a potential threat to the road, I have to go some way before there is a sufficient break in the trees. Through the narrow gap between trees and the tall hedge the monastery stood. There is another set of buildings next to the monastery. It appears that there are three in total. The road continues with fields on both sides. The monastery side to the left has a more gradual gradient reaching

upward whereas the River Honddu side to the right has a much steeper descent before opening out to a level plain at the bottom.

The road turns briefly southward, up yet another incline before turning sharply south-east. Yet more trees – they seem to curl around the monastery, defending it from me – and a skip obscure my view. The skip with its fading yellow and large blotches of rust is brutal against the backdrop of stone and greenery and it briefly pulls me out the waking lucid dream. Carfax wouldn't have seen a skip; I think it highly unlikely that there would have been one here in the 1940's. Once I am beyond the skip, I stop and focus. The first of the buildings is a ramshackle stable, complete with a few ponies, seemingly the only residents up here. The next building is a small church with another building, self-catering accommodation, attached. Outside stands a statue of Mary and a few old benches facing across the valley. The monastery has public access from this side and the building to the right of it, with the 'DO NOT ENTER' gate is a private residence. Leaning on the gate I leave the present day behind and fall back into Rolt's pages.



Figure 8: Capel y Ffin Monastery

I had arrived, and am standing behind at the climax of the story. ‘While fascination fought with terror within him he drew nearer, leaving the lane for the short turf of field where his footfalls made no sound, until he reached a position from which he could see into the roofless nave. (pp. 47-48).⁴⁸

Carfax is drawn here repeatedly and it is not hard to see why. It is a bleak but beautiful place. His time advances. I do not follow him to London, but I know that is where he goes and when he turns some months later I note the difference in his face. His eyes are

⁴⁸ Rolt, Cwm Garon, *Sleep No More* pp. 47-48.

dark and his face pale. He has not slept well. He often looks over his shoulder and stares through me, the ghost in his story, as he is stalked by this feeling in the landscape itself yet determined to follow it in turn.

Despite the fine weather, I hear the thunder and squint at the flash of lightening. Through it, in the monastery, the bodies dancing around the fire and a horned figure on a throne. They are but shadows, obscured by smoke to Carfax and to me they will disappear if I fully open my eyes.

‘...the spell which had bound senses and held limbs from motion had lifted. Carfax screamed, and, slipping and stumbling, he ran towards the crags of Black Daren. At the sound of his voice, two squat figures left the circle round the fire. Their pale forms glimmered in the darkness as they followed lithely after, moving in swift silence over the screes.’ p. 49

Chapter Three: *Sheepshagger* by Niall Griffiths

1 Text Analysis

Niall Griffiths (born 1966) is a novelist who currently resides in the Cambrian mountains. Much of his work is set in and around the Welsh coastal town of Aberystwyth and the surrounding countryside. Griffiths is adept at both nature writing and displaying the grittier elements of human existence, both of which he often explores in excruciating detail. From rural or nature writing in one instance to uncomfortable descriptions of bodily movements. If we return to the basic definition of psychogeography as our entry point, ‘the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals’ Debord, then the best Griffiths novel for me to examine is, *Sheepshagger*.

Sheep shagger is typically a derogatory term for someone from Wales, though some evidence indicates its usage towards people from other rural areas of the UK, is an insult implying that the target performs sexual intercourse with sheep. The phrase is largely seen as being an insult directed at the Welsh by the English, however, if you are in a Welsh city or town then it is used for those from the countryside and if you are from the countryside then it is used for anyone in close proximity to a farm or sheep. It is thought that the origin of this phrase is simply due to the prevalence of sheep farming in Wales, a practice borne from a lack of decent arable land and an abundance of small hills meaning that in many areas of Wales the only remotely profitable farm produce was sheep.

Sheepshagger was published in 2001 and it details the life and crimes of a young man named Ianto in the early 1990’s. Ianto loses his home, a home which has been in his family for generations. He is subsequently forced to squat and sleep in abandoned ruins as he

descends into a primal figure who commits three murders. It is set in a location frequently covered in Griffiths' fiction, Aberystwyth and the surrounding Cambrian Mountains.

The central character, Ianto, is quickly established as not just a figure *in* the landscape, but he is *of* the landscape. In just the first few pages Griffiths establishes an atmosphere, a feeling that Ianto and his lineage is of this specific place. His link to this place is generations deep, an unbroken lineage with the earth. Griffiths does this to show that Ianto's identity is inseparable from this landscape, he is a manifestation of this specific place and is often described in natural, geographical language: he is, 'all knot and garl,' or 'a creature of peat and rock and rain.' He is fused with his home.

'... he plays with two small stones... Ianto has found these small stone marbles dotted with microfossils, perished in an age when all life only crawled or swam and he is repeatedly banging them together...where his grandmother wrestles with washing among struggling vegetables in the scrubby front garden of the old and falling whitewashed farmhouse...' p. 4⁴⁹

From this short passage we know that generations of his family have lived here for generations. Griffiths' use of fossils here makes us appreciate the age of this land. Life has been here for longer than any nation has laid claim to it and Ianto is just the latest living being in that line. Something as simple as his grandmother pegging washing out with the 'old and falling whitewashed farmhouse' in the background suggest, before we later get confirmation of it, that his family has lived here for a long time. This is the first example of many throughout the text that Ianto is almost a living breathing piece of Cambrian land.

Yet, later in this same section, we encounter the brutal reality of living in this place:

⁴⁹ Griffiths, Niall, *Sheepshagger* (London: Vintage, 2002)

The high bleating of a lamb in distress sounds behind him unfamiliarly and frighteningly close as he turns to see the small animal newborn-white hobble on wobbling legs towards him, the black rag of a raven wheeling away in the wind from its nodding head, black carrion bird, he who in these mountains hops rapid and beak agape and red-rimmed eye drilling at the newly born or newly deceased. ... The lamb cries and cries again, the dark and bubbling holes in its face expanding into howling voids which begin to draw little Ianto in and he reaches out young-fingered and desperate to fill those awful weeping gaps with his plaything pebbles, to put something where there is nothing, to bring substance upon emptiness... the chubby thumbs themselves sink with a suck and a squelch deeper into tissue and crunch through cartilage then wetly into brainmush and the lamb falls instantly limp into Ianto's hands... Ianto with the lamb, dead on his young hands. The old woman scrabbling stiff-limbed towards him. He is five, Ianto is. p. 7⁵⁰

Similarly to Cwm Garon, we encounter a dead lamb. Sadly, it seems, a dead or dying lamb is an image to turn to for the purposes of showing the countryside at its normal natural and brutal self. However, Griffiths' prose pushes much further than Rolt's in the excruciating detail and this analysis offers the abridged version taken from a two-page passage.

Griffiths' detail can be uncomfortable at times. However, his attempts to examine every aspect of a scene, place or event is invaluable for my research methods. If the text is a map then offering more detail is always welcome.

Intrigue as to who Ianto is, and what he may have done, is established early by Griffiths by having others, his former friend group, discuss him and his crimes. The way that Griffiths writes dialogue draws the reader in and encourages them to read on. In Griffiths' work, like *Stump* and *Runt* dialogue begins with a dash and a lack of speech tags which makes it seem more energetic than something more formulaic like the dialogue seen in most other work of fiction. The effect of this is that the dialogue is more fluid, reading faster and therefore feeling more like a real conversation. The reader is dropped into this conversation and we don't know who is speaking, like a guest at a party and you've found yourself in a room where a group of close friends are talking. Griffiths builds the dual intrigue of wanting

⁵⁰ Griffiths, Niall, *Sheepshagger* (London: Vintage, 2002)

to know who is speaking and knowing that whoever Ianto is, he is a murderer, to make readers want to read on. For example:

- Hell of a boy, Ianto, wasn't he.
- Hell of a boy's right, aye. Straight from-a fucking place he was if yew ask me, like.
- Nah, he wasn't. No Demon in him, mun. He wasn't put yer on this earth fully formed as a murderer, like, he –
- Murderer? Just a murderer?
- Yeh, and the fuckin rest, mun, and the fuckin rest.
- ... he had a birth and a childhood and upbringing like us all. Only his was all fucked, like.
- No excuse.
- That's easy for yew to say, tho, innit? I reckon Ianto's childhood would've turned Mother fuckin Theresa into a murderer, mun. Tellin yew. Would've turned anyone fuckin crazy, that would've. p⁵¹.9

As illustrated, there are several lines of dialogue before we have a name for any of the speakers and yet we know Ianto has committed a murder in just the first two lines. This creates a sense of privileged knowledge for the reader, we are eavesdropping. The fact that it is written in vernacular, the local dialect, is not a barrier either. The phonetic way the dialogue is written works lends itself well to this feeling of eavesdropping and allows readers to absorb and even learn the vernacular. Each of the voices feels like a fully realised character yet we don't know each of their names and who is speaking. The questions raised by these unknown characters early on in the text, specifically those about Ianto's origin, are explored immediately afterwards on page four. This is the start of the italicised chapters which give background to Ianto's life but also tie him firmly to the landscape.

Griffiths justifies his use of vernacular as follows:

Also, when we look at people, at fictional characters, there should be no authorial sanction; the characters should not simply be ciphers – they should come alive in many ways. So for that reason I allow them to speak as they would speak, to express themselves exactly how they really would express themselves. p. 121

⁵¹ Griffiths, Niall, *Sheepshagger* (London: Vintage, 2002)

This ethos is readily evident in the dialogue. But the ‘many ways’ that Griffiths refers to here exist outside of dialogue. For example, Ianto rarely speaks in the novel but he is brought to life in other ways. Despite being nearly mute, Ianto does ‘express himself how he really would express himself.’ He does this through violence and through a clear understanding of the natural world. His primary language is one of the land itself and he is in direct communion with it, at times when he is calm the land too can be calm and the same for angry etc. It could be argued that Ianto fits better into the landscape as an animal as opposed to a human character. At one point we see Ianto walking along on all fours stalking his prey in a riverbed. He is, as previously mentioned, a creature of the landscape, its manifestation.

This expression and Ianto’s circumstances could result in an interpretation of him as being someone who has lost everything, has nothing and is seeking revenge. However, his situation is more complex than that, as Griffiths stated in an interview. In response to the interviewer’s question, ‘he’s a rural mountain boy, who is nearly silent. I think that he has nothing. Because he has neither a home, nor language, nor gifts, or would you agree?’

Griffiths replies:

On one level he has nothing, as you say, but on another level he has something which I think everybody wants, which everybody has lost which is a kind of extremely strong, so strong that it goes beyond language, connection to the natural world you know. He’s as much a part of the natural world as the buzzards and badgers and stoats and things that... as much as the rocks you know. So in that sense he has everything.⁵²

This sense of something inherent within Ianto which goes beyond language is evident through his lack of speech. His connection to the natural world is so strong that he is never able to decouple from it – any time spent in ‘civilisation’ sees him eventually return to the rural landscape. To further understand and get closer to Ianto’s character, we need to explore the landscape that he is inseparable from.

⁵² Pekka Termonen, *Jyvaskyla Book Fair, Niall Griffiths, April 12, 2008* Youtube, 12 April 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIDEOID>

The novel is set in places inspired by specific locations, like Aberystwyth, yet it appears Griffiths has taken more license with descriptions of lesser-known rural places than urban places, which are comparatively well-trodden. Many of the descriptions of Aberystwyth and Ianto's journey through the town could be recognised today by the landmarks mentioned in the novel yet the rural places in the text have had their features organised by Griffiths and may not necessarily be true to how they are in real life. This is a major departure from the previous *dérive* where one can follow, step for step, a journey taken by a character, because the fictional map was drawn with tracing paper over an OS map.

These key places, such as the location of the stone circle and mineshaft from Ianto's eventual murder and Ianto's home are determined by an author's amalgam, which is a fictional space. The features of the landscape are entirely genuine but could be applicable to other places outside of the Cambrian Mountains. To use a definite marker given in the text when Ianto gets the bus into town, Aberystwyth, the author states that he passes a sign saying the town is nine miles away. Open an OS map and trace outward from Aberystwyth and at roughly that distance these features can start to be seen on the map. There are several disused/abandoned mine shafts and stone circles and cairns in this area, but their placement in the text has been determined by Griffiths.

This fictionalisation of elements in the rural landscape, at first, could appear to hamper any attempt to conduct a *dérive*. But by focussing on the following passage, I can determine where to begin. The passage is as follows:

Ianto crests the dingle and stands panting, sweat cooling on his brow and face. He climbs up here fairly regularly but is not yet and nor will ever be accustomed to this vista, this long and powerful prospect; the swooping dingle and the spread estuary beyond, the roof of Llŷr's cottage below button-sized and gapped like a kicked mouth in the small copse of largely moribund trees edging the thin ribbon of road. A space too huge for the eye to drink, the eye must dart and flicker like a bat to take it all in. Ianto stands and surveys like a poor lord, sees the mound to his right and across the valley the knee shaped swell, on the far side of which the entrance to the disused silver mine stands like an attentive grave and which is topped by

the circle of standing stones, ancient and dark and glyphed with strange shapes, incomprehensible messages of man's hand and still older imprints of living and easier forms caught in cold stone when it ran and flowed like mud. Only the stone's crowns can be seen from this location and smaller than toes at this distance, but Ianto nevertheless squints their way, his matted light brown hair tossing lankly in the breeze.' p. 15⁵³.

Discerning this location on an OS map has been something of a *dérive* in itself. Once I had found where to begin, considering the fictional nature of this landscape and its loosely-structured relationship to reality, I chose to use a technique described by Robert Macfarlane for understanding psychogeography in urban exploration, but within this rural setting: 'Unfold a street map of London, place a glass, rim down, anywhere on the map, and draw round its edge. Pick up the map, go out into the city, and walk the circle, keeping as close as you can to the curve.' ⁵⁴.

Based on the viewpoint from the hill upon which Ianto stands – the estuary is visible, as are the tips of a stone circle. This area of the map features many disused mines and stone cairns. Some of the cairns in this area are arranged in a circular formation rather than the more traditional pile we might associate with the word, cairn. I believe this area to closely resemble the region of Ianto's house. Adding detail to the passage above we later learn that there was a protective natural ridge near the house belonging to Ianto's *Mamcu* (grandmother) – indicated on the OS map as the line 552 – this area is the mountain, *Y Glog/* The Bell. I have drawn my circle as indicated on the image below (Figure 8) this is easily where Ianto is standing when surveying the landscape early in the text, given the features that he can see from his vista. The circle method is reminiscent of the Mobius Strip. I argue that this method is appropriate to use for this novel as, lacking a direct path to follow, it proves

⁵³ Griffiths, *Sheepshagger*, (London: Vintage 2002)

⁵⁴ Robert Macfarlane, 'A Road of One's Own: Past and Present Artists of the Randomly Motivated Walk', *Times Literary Supplement*, 5349 (7 October 2005), pp. 3–4.

that a method of urban psychogeographic practice can be applied in a rural setting.

Furthermore, a circle suits the cyclical, reciprocal nature of Hauntogeography.



Figure 8: Circle indicating dérive location

2 Cambrian Mountains near Aberystwyth Dérive

The weather was not brilliant, which is to be expected in Wales in February. I certainly could have chosen a better day for a walk. When I set off in the car it was overcast and grey but the rain was forecast for about 4pm and I thought that the dérive would be complete by then.

However, as I climbed to my planned parking place at about 10:30am, visibility reduced dramatically. I thought that the car misted up and so I tried to clear the windscreen and open the windows – only to find that the mist is outside and incredibly thick. At only 300m above sea level, it feels somewhat surprising to see such a drastic change but due to little hills folding into one another with sporadic pockets densely packed with trees, the area holds onto the mist. Still, I feel as though something is testing my resolve. It's not entirely inhospitable but it is a lonesome place. The wind has a certain bite to it and the push to leave and try again another day is strong. After 30 minutes of waiting, in the hope that the mist will clear – it didn't – I set off.



Figure 9: Starting point

It's hard to believe just how close I am to Aberystwyth. The town is probably bustling with students and in summer is heaving with tourists. Here, roughly twelve miles away, I could shout as loud and as long as I want and no one would ever hear me. Given that much of this land is farmed or managed, there's also a distinct absence of sheep. I keep expecting them to pop out of the mist. Either that or a farmer, ready to scold me for trespassing. Consideration has to be given to whether a *dérive* alone is dangerous. I'm sure that it could be, depending on where you are and what you are trying to do. I'd told my family where I was and what I was doing, but I am alone. My mind turns to Robert Macfarlane's *Old Ways*, in which he documents his walk of the Broomway in Kent, the so-called most dangerous path in Britain. He was told not to attempt it in the mist; when he arrived it was misty and he still completed it. This momentarily bolsters my resolve but the first breath of wind causes me to

tuck my chin into my chest and think, yes, but he followed a defined path and he wasn't alone. Whereas I'd barely started the circle drawn by me, one which crossed over farmland, a river and hopefully took in some sights mentioned and covered in *Sheepshagger*⁵⁵.

The land dips down towards a river, thankfully, it is not very wide. Ianto's skinny frame in likely 'unsuitable' clothing would have felt the chill much more than I do. Thankfully, the river is narrow enough for me to jump across and I'm met with a steep, almost sheer bank. Ianto would be used to the conditions up here. He, being so strongly linked to the land, would have known exactly where he was at any given moment. Unlike me who, with no mobile signal, is worried about where I am in the circle. The river certainly does not have a bridge nearby, under which one could pounce on a schoolboy for their sandwiches, as Ianto does. But still, I think of Ianto on all fours, knuckles and hands frozen white from the water. I pick up a stone, about the size of a baking potato, from the brook. I imagine its cold solidity dripping with warm blood.

A question for consideration when completing this *dérive* pertains to whether I followed the circle correctly, as there should have already been a small stone cairn present and quite close. The visibility is so poor that I could have easily walked right through it and I'd never have noticed. Links can be made between this *dérive* and the analysis and writing of this piece of work. It rather feels like a journey through mist forging your own path whilst also looking for clues. Yet that same parcel of land could hold the very feature you were looking for, and are right next to and you'd never know.

I find what I think is a path trodden by sheep and follow that for a little while. Progress and my pace are slow, but it is still faster than my previous fully 'off-road' route. Sudden heavy rain pours through the mist and, though there's no way it can have impacted

⁵⁵ Griffiths, Niall, *Sheepshagger* (London: Vintage 2002)

my journey so quickly, I nevertheless start slipping. The sheep trail ends on a steep slant of hillside and according to my soon-to-be-sodden map I am still following the circle I had identified. I cannot see the summit of this next steep hill though and the climb has to be made, at times, on all fours. Similar to Ianto who crawled on all fours like an animal. Through my muddy palms I have a flash of closeness to the text. An intimacy with the land afforded by the sensory experience, cold wet hands, through my hot breath I glimpse Ianto, staring right at me in the same posture, showing me the way up.

Atop this particular hill, which I did not expect to be so difficult to climb, there should be a ventilation shaft. This area, and more broadly speaking this part of Wales, is littered with evidence of mining past. Old industry haunts the hills and though I am not able to see the shaft, I know that it is here somewhere. The land is alive with the memories of work past. I suddenly become aware of the sound of my breath because I'm breathing heavily. That and the sound of the rain are all I can hear. Hauntology is in the silence. No tools working seams and no bleating. It is isolating. These missing features, workers or sheep, from various points in time are themselves a presence. They are wounds in the landscape which haven't and won't get the chance to heal and it is a strange thing to be remote, alone and listen.

Usually, the countryside is filled with life and you are often never too far away from it. However, much of the countryside we see is not wilderness but carefully managed and maintained by farmers, DEFRA and the Forestry Commission, among others. Even the grass is itself a form of life, I remind myself, but despite this I feel alone. This feeling of isolation gives way to a suspense that at any moment a figure may emerge from the mist. I wouldn't describe this realisation as fear, but I think it is building towards that, like Carfax in Cwm Garon, who felt like there were eyes upon him around every corner. I hadn't anticipated that one *dérive* would speak to another in this way. So much of this has to be based in my own impression, my lack of familiarity and lack of visibility. I think back to other times when I

have been alone in a wilderness and, owing to favourable weather, I think I was spared from the stereotypical feeling of being watched. The feeling subsides once I have ambled my way back down the hill.

My circle takes me through a dense copse. The trees here are very close together, as though they are huddling together for warmth. I join them momentarily, abandoning what was a relatively direct course and zig-zagging between trees until I find one to hide under. It's a beautiful smell, wet fir, and this little place is thick with it. Until I was sitting under the tree, I hadn't considered how thick a path should be. My circle, drawn on Microsoft Paint is perhaps too thick. Yes, it gives me plenty of room in which to roam within the confines of the circular path but sheep, who manage much better out here than I ever will, navigate via very narrow paths. I'm not a skilled map artist. But, this is where giving in to the exploratory nature of the *dérive* is essential. In much the same way that if you are enjoying a book, you continue reading, not knowing what could happen in the course of the narrative. My lack of skill with map reading has made for a different *dérive* experience by giving me a fear of getting lost, forcing me to take a route which required walking on all fours and taking me to places I wouldn't have gone if I was following a well-maintained path.

The mist circles the trees and is not clearing. Every now and then there is a patch which affords me another few feet of visibility and it might only be the way the land unfolds ahead or perhaps a large stone, maybe part of the cairn or circle but they are welcome glimpses. This, it seems, is somewhat akin to how Griffiths reveals a fictionalised version of this place and space. There is of course some overlap here and there, some recognisable features and definitely an atmosphere shared between the book and this place but there is also mist – through which fiction is blended with reality and in which Ianto stands.

At this point the rain fell much heavier. I decided to eat and take shelter in the trees just to see if the rain passed. It did not. But I thought it might be ease off so I emerged and continued. The mist thinned and I saw the road again. But then again, I don't know whether it is thinning or if it has just settled slightly higher than I am. The river, which cuts low through this valley, is more visible than it was when I set out. Also visible now is a little house seemingly cut into the hillside (Figure 10).

It is fortunate that I am only seeing this now as my first thought is not of Ianto staring at his own house now occupied by new owners, but of my own home and of a cup of tea. I wonder too, just how people get to this house? There must be a road or a path, but neither are visible. Then my thoughts turn back to Ianto and his Mamcu, cut off from civilisation and firmly at home in this swirling wilderness.



Figure 10: House in the hillside

The car is not far away now and I'm soaking. The one thing that I am disappointed in is a lack of stone as from the description in the text I had expected to see a few of them – a stone circle and possibly a cairn and a ventilation shaft. I wonder whether this is due to the weather, a result of Griffiths writing a fictionalised landscape or because my own practices with the map were flawed. I had envisioned standing next to, or even on top of them at some points. But then again, maybe that is an important consideration for a *dérive*; what we expect from a circular walk or reading experience may be different to what we receive. I resolve to return one day when the weather is better and clearer.

I did return a few days later and though it was still wet it was much clearer, I was able to find a stone circle, it was nestled in the edge of a farmer's field (Figure 11). It seems odd to me to fence off something as sturdy and ancient as the stone circle. These stones certainly are not big enough to imagine an intricate murder scene taking place amongst them, especially when the farmer's home is not too far away. Perhaps once upon a time though, in a distant past when the soil level was not quite as high and the stones stood a little taller on the ground. This is a critique of the rural literary *dérive*, as despite my earlier assertion that the landscape in the rural world doesn't change much, it can and when it does it is less noticeable to visitors.



Figure 11: Stone circle on a clearer day

Chapter Four: *One Moonlit Night* by Caradog Prichard

1 Text Analysis

Set during the First World War in the slate quarrying village of Bethesda, Caradog Prichard's *One Moonlit Night* was not initially embraced by many of his fellow North Welsh people.

The novel offers an unflinching portrayal of the often brutal and traumatic lives of Bethesda's inhabitants, revealing what lies hidden behind closed doors in this tightly knit community.

Yet beneath its social realism, the narrative is suffused with the supernatural: from its opening scenes and throughout its nocturnal settings, the text frequently adopts a dreamlike, hallucinatory quality, evoking a liminal world where boundaries between the living and spectral, memory and presence, begin to dissolve.

For the purposes of this commentary my focus is Chapter 8, a section in which the landscape takes on a voice of its own through the child narrator. Here, the environment refuses to remain a mere backdrop; instead, it becomes an active, living presence: the land asserts itself as a participant in the narrator's psychic and emotional drama. Visiting Bethesda today, one can still experience this uncanny presence viscerally: the village appears carved from the hillside, clinging to its steep slopes as if the earth itself both supports and constrains it. Cars hold tight to steep streets with handbrake and prayer, while houses lean into each other, as if precariously balanced between emergence and absorption into the land. There is an intimate, even unsettling fusion of place and built environment that echoes the novel's animistic view of the landscape.

At first glance, the landscape may appear inert, a passive hill looming over the village, but this assumption is overturned in Chapter 8. The 'Queen of Snowdon' emerges as a figure of silent dominion—remote, imposing, and utterly indifferent—casting a shadow over the villagers and the narrator alike. The darkness that 'swallowed everything' suggests

more than literal nightfall; it embodies the enveloping weight of history, trauma, and loss that hangs over Bethesda. This personification of the land infuses it with a spectral agency, a presence that is simultaneously physical, emotional, and metaphysical. The landscape is not simply inhabited but possessed, resonating with what hauntogeography reveals: places are haunted by the stories, memories, and traumas that have passed through them, their histories echoing like ghosts in the wind and shadow.

References to a ‘screaming wind’ further deepen this spectral charge, evoking the Cŵn Annwn—the mythic hounds of the Welsh Otherworld whose howls portend death and calamity. This intertwining of landscape, myth, and psychological state signals the profound hauntological tension at play, where folklore, historical trauma, and personal loss converge to unsettle both narrator and reader. The wind is no mere atmospheric detail but a psychic echo, a spectral force that links the interior life of the narrator with the external environment, collapsing the boundaries between the seen and unseen, the living and the dead.

The narrator’s trauma is rooted in the slow, wrenching loss of his mother to an asylum, which he experiences as a form of death and erasure, with the institution itself imagined as a coffin. The landscape, as voiced through the Queen of Snowdon and the spectral wind, is far from comforting or maternal. Instead, it is cold, distant, and dominating, mirroring the narrator’s inner turmoil. The landscape and the narrator’s psyche are entwined in a reciprocal, almost symbiotic relationship: his emotional distress is externalised and echoed by the natural world, transforming hills, wind, and darkness into extensions of his suffering. For a child grappling with trauma beyond his capacity to process, this fusion becomes a means of giving shape and voice to what is otherwise unspeakable. The world around him becomes both the stage and the symptom of his pain, a hauntogeographic space where place and psyche are inseparable.

Bethesda itself is inseparable from its industrial history. As a quarrying town, it sits adjacent to what was, at the time, the largest slate quarry in the world. However, Prichard's novel also gestures toward the profound social and economic upheaval wrought by the Great Strike of 1900-1903. Though many quarrymen returned to work, the strike left deep scars—economic instability, community fracturing, and widespread emigration. By 1914, the workforce had nearly halved, and the quarry's decline was inexorable, hastened further by the First World War and the subsequent depression. These historical realities haunt the novel's setting as much as its characters, embedding a spectral socio-political dimension into the landscape itself. The quarrying strike and its aftermath resonate as ghostly undercurrents that inflect the village's atmosphere, giving a palpable weight to the themes of loss, displacement, and economic decay.

In *One Moonlit Night*, then, the fusion of narrator and landscape is both psychological and social, personal and historical. Niall Griffiths's *Sheepshagger* similarly entwines character and terrain, but while Griffiths' protagonist Ianto is born of the landscape, here the narrator and environment are so thoroughly fused that they become indistinguishable. The trauma within the child is externalised in the weather, wind, and topography; the environment no longer merely happens to him but 'speaks' through him. This collapse of boundaries between self and place is the essence of hauntogeography.

Earlier in this commentary, I defined psychogeography as the study of how geographical environments shape emotions and character. In Chapter 8 of *One Moonlit Night*, this concept is vividly realised. The narrator's nocturnal *dérive* through Bethesda is not a leisurely drift but a fevered journey shaped by emotional gravity and a hostile, indifferent environment. The mountain, usually a symbol of grandeur and permanence, becomes a barrier that both contains and isolates, imposing physical and psychological constraints. This rural psychogeography reveals that the affective weight of place is not the sole province of

urban environments; remote landscapes can exert equal, if not greater, influence upon the psyche. The village's geography mirrors the narrator's inner landscape: harsh, confining, spectral.

The concept of 'thin places' from Celtic spirituality—a boundary where the spiritual and material worlds blur—provides a fitting framework to understand this hauntogeographic fusion. Bethesda, in Prichard's depiction, is such a thin place. Here, the boundary between past and present, real and supernatural, conscious and unconscious is permeable. The narrator's *dérive* enacts a crossing of this threshold, wandering between worlds, inhabiting a spectral geography where memories and histories hover like ghosts in the landscape. This liminality intensifies the novel's emotional power, casting the landscape as an active participant in the unfolding trauma, rather than a mere backdrop.

In this way, the chapter's landscape is a hauntogeographic palimpsest, layered with spectral traces of loss, history, myth, and personal trauma. The Queen of Snowdon's silent dominion is both a literal and figurative shadow—a reminder of the histories and psychic wounds that shape and haunt Bethesda. The screaming wind, the darkness, and the oppressive geography become conduits for these spectral forces, turning the environment into a living, breathing participant in the narrator's psychic *dérive*. This entanglement of place, psyche, and spectrality is the very essence of hauntogeography, revealing the novel's enduring power as a text that animates place through memory, trauma, and myth.

2 Bethesda Dérive

I parked the car just behind the main road on the Afon Ogwen side of Bethesda. The river has an impressive current and the view from the carpark gives just a snippet of its rage. Yet there is no one around. No one else observing other than myself. It is an odd feeling, to be so close to something as frenetic as this little section of the river yet also alone. It is easily explained though; the town lies before me and not everyone will just come and stare at the river. They will likely be much more concerned with the lake that bears its name.

Over the past several years, the high street in Bethesda has diminished. The closure of shops and leisure activities have taken people with them, despite it being a Monday morning, I am the only person on the high street. The road remains relatively busy but that is just people passing through on their way to Bangor. Once you're off the high street, Bethesda begins to feel more like a rabbit warren than a village. Tiny off-shoots from streets fall on different levels to one another as I climb steep roads. Pathways poke out of unexpected gaps in walls and twist up to the next level. It feels like the whole place has been excavated out of the hillside like the former quarry it faces. This feeling is bolstered by the surrounding mountains and hills which hug Bethesda, making it feel like a closed-off place despite the arterial main road running through it.

The inclement weather doesn't help this feeling of being hemmed in. Mist, again, shrouds the peaks and the rain, lighter than it feels, combine to brew a faint claustrophobic feeling. It lingers on the edge of vision and is revealed in the breath of wind which draws back the veil only to remind you of the mountains, as if they could even be forgotten. With another exhalation, the peaks and former quarry are again hidden with just the outline remaining.

Crossing the road, I enter Adwy'r Nant. Despite stopping for a moment, I don't hear the Queen of Snowdon, the Bride of the Beautiful One. I can't really hear anything besides the odd car on the main road behind me. However, a few moments later and following a break in the traffic, I can hear water. Continuing along Adwy'r Nant I meet the source of the sound – Afon Ffrydlas (Figure 12).



Figure 12: Afon Ffrydlas

I walk alongside the river for a while. In other more built-up towns and cities, a small fenced off river would likely be full of detritus. Here though, the river bursts with foam and appears to be free of rubbish. The adjacent road climbs steeply and soon I am on one of the many rabbit warren streets.

At times this place has felt like a traditional mining village – terraced houses cramming in a lot of families into a relatively small space. While that is true to an extent, most of these properties don't look all that old. But between them and next to Afon Ffrydlas, ancient slate walls snake through and guide me onto what I have determined could be Post Lane.

There is no 'Post Lane' in Bethesda. Even a rough translation, for example, Lon Bost, cannot be found. But one of the roads, one of the longest aside from the main road of course, which connects two ends of the old village was called Telford Post Road before it acquired street names. It isn't too much of a leap to imagine that this road is Prichard's Post Lane (Figure 13).



Figure 13: Post Lane

Given its prominence in the text and its function it is a safe assumption. It is so very quiet here. However, there are eyes and ears everywhere. This was reinforced by the physical characteristic of this place. Roads and houses are built into hillsides which must make for interesting layouts inside. Many of them have little nooks and crannies which people use to keep their bins or post in, and side entrances that you could easily miss and within which, watching eyes could reside.

I slow down by some much older looking houses. Not least of all because of the incline, I have risen quite some way above the main road now, but to appreciate the unique footprint of this place. The seeming age of the properties and the timeless quality of the materials, slate and stone, help with feeling like I am walking in the past. The odd plastic garden chair and modern cars challenge my drift in time. The mountains occasionally peek out from behind some clouds, challenging the dominance of grey.

Between two houses someone has hung half a dozen or so poems on a fence either painted or carved into slate. Most are in Welsh but one is in English, 'Reservoirs' by R.S Thomas (Figure 14): ⁵⁶

There are places in Wales I don't go:
Reservoirs that are the subconscious
Of a people, troubled far down
With gravestones, chapels, villages even;
The serenity of their expression
Revolts me, it is a pose
For strangers, a watercolour's appeal
To the mass, instead of the poem's
Harsher conditions. There are the hills,
Too; gardens gone under the scum
Of the forests; and the smashed faces
Of the farms with the stone trickle
Of their tears down the hills' side.

Where can I go, then, from the smell
Of decay, from the putrefying of a dead
Nation? I have walked the shore
For an hour and seen the English
Scavenging among the remains
Of our culture, covering the sand
Like the tide and, with the roughness
Of the tide, elbowing our language
Into the grave that we have dug for it.

⁵⁶ Thomas, R. S., *Collected Poems: 1945–1990* (London: Dent, 1993)



Figure 14: Slate featuring R. S. Thomas poem 'Reservoirs' and Cofiwch Dryweryn slogan

I passed many little waterfalls on the drive here, just a few minutes out of Bethesda, and they fed into Llyn Ogwen, a beautiful shallow lake resting between the road and a steep scree covered hillside. And after following Afon Ffrydlas here I feel I have followed tears to this point. The forlorn slate heap is briefly visible over the fence upon which the poem hangs. A large portion of the quarry is now owned by Zip World, who operate the fastest or longest zip line in Europe. I know of several of the reservoirs that Thomas refers to and it is possible to imagine that the person who hung these poems knows them too. The slate includes the phrase, *Cofiwch Dryweryn* or Remember Dryweryn, a reference to a village flooded in 1965 to provide water for Liverpool. The decision was taken by Liverpool City Council despite lacking consent from Welsh authorities and amid fierce protests. It is hard not to feel at the

very least, a twinge of anger and sadness, despite standing relatively high on a hillside with a village unfolding below.

The poem causes me to think back to Llanthony and the Cambrian mountains, particularly the lines, ‘for strangers, the watercolours appeal to the mass, instead of the poem’s harsher conditions.’ Previously, I have stated that the idea of a pastoral idyll is challenged early on in the texts I’ve covered, yet this poem, though dealing with issues specific to Wales, also highlights the human pain and suffering that can happen and has happened in rural places. The justification for these perceived injustices – flooding villages – is to satisfy someone else’s need for resources. The paradox of nature or mother nature is that it is without conscience – survival of the fittest, suffering is built into the model – yet at the same time mother nature knows best. Rewilding efforts and greening projects have come a long way and at great cost to reach the point where we as a species understand more about the careful, gentle hand that is required to restore balance. This is why ‘Reservoirs’ and stories like this hit that little bit harder, because the poem does not refer to nature red in tooth and claw but the human, specifically English, but human influence on the landscape, the deep cultural wounds inflicted and the importance of remembering these events. These reservoirs, some of which are visited in great numbers and are home to a wide variety of wildlife, may appear as flat calm places to be enjoyed but really, they are scars. One could easily say, that it is wonderful to see nature reclaim these places, that if the villages had been left intact there may not be so many birds or fish, after all, weren’t they here first? I could see and appreciate that point of view, if it wasn’t for the fact that it is merely an outcome of a decision taken by people to serve people.

The rain is heavier. Post Lane, connecting Carneddi to Garlan, rises further still. Eventually the road splits in two, with both options being dead ends. One ends in a bunk house hostel and the other ends at a house. I had expected the road to give way to an old path

which I could take towards Llyn Dilyn. But it seems, even after chatting to a local who asked why I was standing at the end of their drive, that those who walk to Llyn Dilyn do so by driving away from Bethesda and starting on the other side of the mountain.

I was disappointed by this but it reminded me that the Bethesda I am standing in and the one of Prichard's creation are different. There is a great deal of overlap but some things are quite different. Given that Prichard's narrator frequently talks of going to the end of Post Lane then on to the lake I was initially disappointed by my inability to get there. I turned to leave and I can feel the watery eye of Dilyn boring into my back.

Chapter Five: CONCLUSION

Hauntogeography – developed through the blending of psychogeography and hauntology – offers a new way of understanding our relationship with place. This practice allows us to actively engage with both literature and landscape through embodied, affective experience. While readers might examine a text's politics, narrative structure, or history, Hauntogeography invites them to go further: to walk into the world of a story and encounter it in three dimensions. Through my *dérives*, I have shown that this practice can build bridges between narrative, memory, and physical space—where the gap between fiction and reality becomes something that can be crossed, or at least blurred.

These are not theoretical exercises or literary tourism. They are lived, sensory experiences that move away from the abstract and toward something intuitive, felt, and remembered. Through this approach, I have created what I now understand as a *third text*—one born not solely from the author's hand or the landscape itself, but from the interaction between them and the reader-walker. In this sense the third text is beyond a standard interpretation of the text, which is itself an individual experience, but it offers something wholly personal, bordering on spiritual.

Robert Macfarlane writes in *The Wild Places*:

My journeys had revealed to me new logics of connection between discrete parts of Britain and Ireland, beyond the systems of motorway and flight-path. There were geological links: tor answering to tor, flint to flint, sandstone to sandstone, granite giving way to mud. There were migration lines of birds and animals. There were the unpredictable movements of weather and light: the passage of blizzards, mists and darkness, and the wildness they conferred on places. And there were the people, alive and dead, who had dwelled in or passed through the landscapes. A webbing of story and memory joined up my places, as well as other more material affinities. The connections made by all of these forces – rocks, creatures, weathers, people – had laid new patterns upon the country, as though it had been swilled in a developing fluid, and unexpected images had emerged, ghostly figures showing through the mesh of roads and cities. ⁵⁷p. 314

⁵⁷ Macfarlane, Robert, *The Wild Places* (London: Granta, 2007)

I believe he is describing a haunted geography, a space marked by presence and absence, by lives once lived and narratives half-felt. The ‘ghostly figures’ he names emerge from beneath the urban and the rural alike. They are what I have encountered in my dérives: not ghosts in the traditional sense, but echoes, spectres of fiction, of lost futures and of personal memory. Like Macfarlane, I have found that the relationship between reader and land is reciprocal. It folds back on itself, like the Möbius strip I have referenced throughout this commentary.

For my dérives, I read a story, carried my experience of it into the world, and let the world answer back. But something more happens, too: the remembered story becomes altered in the act of walking. It shifts, softens, inhabits the body. It becomes a simulation – not in the sense of imitation, but in the sense Baudrillard describes, a reality unto itself. He argues that simulation is not merely false representation; rather, it breaks down the boundary between the real and the imagined:

“The simulacrum is never what hides the truth – it is truth that hides that there is none. The simulacrum is true.” (*Simulacra and Simulation*) p. 3⁵⁸

In this sense, the *dérive* becomes not a representation of the story, but a lived manifestation of it. The walker who holds the story close enough, and moves through the landscape with intention, can enter a kind of waking lucid dream – where fiction feels present and grounded, and the world feels charged with narrative potential. The *dérive* becomes a way to walk through fiction, not as a character with agency, but as a reader transformed by motion and place.

⁵⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994) <https://0ducks.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/simulacra-and-simulation-by-jean-baudrillard.pdf> [Accessed 21 August 2024]

This is why timing matters. I found that to fully inhabit the third text, the *dérive* must occur shortly after reading – ideally within a few days, and no longer than a fortnight. The story must still be fresh in the reader’s memory, with images and events still glowing in the mind. If I could repeat the Cwm Garon *dérive*, I would read the story on the first night of my stay at Llanthony Priory, then wake the next morning and walk. Letting the *dérive* fill the space between two sleeps would bring me even closer to the lucid, drifting state I aimed to achieve. If I were to repeat the *Sheepshagger* *dérive* then I would like to read and wild camp in the Cambrian mountains and conduct the *dérive* the following morning. And if I were to undertake a *One Moonlit Night* *dérive* then I would like to find somewhere to stay in the heart of Bethesda, preferably not a hotel, and I wake and read the novel before conducting the *dérive* at night.

The effect of the *dérive* takes place in the space between map and memory. It begins as an attempt to reduce the mimetic gap – to see the story’s landscape as it might have been. But it quickly becomes more than that. The *dérive* shifts from drifting in an unconscious place to walking with intent, like a guided meditation. The map alone cannot get you there. The text alone cannot either. But if the reader/walker is willing to let them speak to one another, with their body being a conduit for the dialogue between text and place, and they carry the narrative closely and let go of expectation, they will find themselves drifting between worlds.

This could of course be undertaken in an urban space but solitude matters. As with prayer or meditation, it is easier to hear the quiet voices when the noise of others fades. Rural spaces also offer continuity: hills and rivers remain relatively unchanged across human lifespans, allowing deeper connections to story and place.

Throughout this journey, in many ways, the PhD has been an intellectual *dérive*, one word has quietly lingered and it is one that I have thus far been reluctant to use but as it has been silent and unspoken in my experiences and work thus far, I think that it needs to be mentioned: Hiraeth. A Welsh word which has no direct English translation, it is understood to be a mixture between nostalgia and longing yet greater than both. It is a longing for something you cannot return to, a homesickness for a place or a time that may have never existed. For the purposes of Hauntography and my experiences reading and walking these narrative paths, it is a longing to visit or inhabit a page of fiction, or to see the world through the author's eyes. It is a wish to return to these texts as if for the first time whilst knowing that will never be possible. My *dérives* are underpinned by hiraeth and it is inseparable from the practice of Hauntography. Each walk is shaped by a longing – reaching out to touch a world of fiction by standing in places where phantoms meet. Hiraeth is what lingers after the final step is taken, it is the view from which I now stand and look back at the texts and places that I have come to know in a different way and I cannot re-enter those worlds or places in the same way.

R.S Thomas' Poem, 'Good' is the most affective and accurate portrayal of hiraeth that I am aware of.

Good

The old man comes out on the hill
and looks down to recall earlier days
in the valley. He sees the stream shine,
the church stand, hears the litter of
children's voices. A chill in the flesh
tells him that death is not far off
now: it is the shadow under the great boughs
of life. His garden has herbs growing.
The kestrel goes by with fresh prey
in its claws. The wind scatters the scent
of wild beans. The tractor operates
on the earth's body. His grandson is there

ploughing; his young wife fetches him
cakes and tea and a dark smile. It is well.⁵⁹ p. 64

The old man of the poem stands like a ghost in his own life. He views the valley not as it is but as it once was and how it will be after him: children's voices recalling his own childhood but also their future, a future that he likely won't see and his grandson ploughing, land he worked will continue to be worked after him. What he sees and hears, these sensory experiences, are tinged with spectral weight and memory, the stream, the kestrel are real and they are anchors to both his past, his present and a knowledge that this will continue after him. Hiraeth threads all of these things together, longing not just for the past but for a time and probably, a way of life that is fading into history as he will. Life goes on in the labours of the land but it is haunted by what came before. However, in the face of this longing and even in the face of death there is a strange kind of peace borne from acceptance: it is well.

Hauntogeography does not resolve the longing, it makes space for it and provides a method of interacting with and confronting it. It invites us to walk with our ghosts, those of fiction, of the past and of futures lost and sometimes, if the story is close enough and the silence deep enough, they walk with us too. It is well.

⁵⁹ Thomas, R. S., *Collected Poems: 1945–1990* (London: Dent, 1993)

Bibliography

Beaumont, Matthew, 'The Politics of the Visor: Looking at Buildings Looking at Us', *CITY: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action*, vol. 22, no. 1 (2018), pp. 1–15

[https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10042894/3/Beaumont%20Visor%20\(CITY%2018\).pdf](https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10042894/3/Beaumont%20Visor%20(CITY%2018).pdf)

Bennett, Andrew, *Readers and Reading* (London: Longman, 1995)

Brady, Bernadette and Jack Hunter (eds), *Sacred Geography: Conversations with Place* (Lampeter: Sophia Centre Press, 2024)

Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. by Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990)

Debord, Guy, 'Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography', *The Situationist International Text Library*, <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/2> [accessed 28 October 2021]

Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Ken Knabb (London: Critical Editions, 2021)

Derrida, Jacques, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994)

Fisher, Mark, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014)

Fisher, Mark, *k-punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher (2004–2016)*, ed. by Darren Ambrose (London: Repeater Books, 2018)

Fisher, Mark, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016)

Freud, Sigmund, 'The Uncanny', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by James Strachey, vol. XVII (1917–1919), pp. 217–256

Griffiths, Niall, *Sheepshagger* (London: Vintage, 2002)

Jackson, Rosemary, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981)

Kripal, Jeffrey J., *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011)

Macfarlane, Robert, *Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination* (London: Granta, 2003)

Macfarlane, Robert, 'A Road of One's Own: Past and Present Artists of the Randomly Motivated Walk', *Times Literary Supplement*, 5349 (7 October 2005), pp. 3–4

Macfarlane, Robert, *The Wild Places* (London: Granta, 2007)

Macfarlane, Robert, *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (London: Penguin, 2012)

'Mobius Strip', vector illustration (SVG), FreeSVG.org, <https://freesvg.org/lummie-mobius-strip> [accessed 28 September 2025]

Moore, Alan, *Alan Moore's Writing Masterclass*, BBC Four, broadcast 15 March 2013, <https://www.bbcmaestro.com/courses/alan-moore/storytelling/lessons/writing-as-enchantment?autoplay=true#lesson-player>

Parnell, Edward, *Ghostland: In Search of a Haunted Country* (London: William Collins, 2019)

Rolt, L. T. C., *Sleep No More: Railway, Canal and Other Stories of the Supernatural* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999)

Self, Will, *Psychogeography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007)

Sinclair, Iain, *Ghost Milk: Calling Time on the Grand Project* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011)

Solnit, Rebecca, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006)

Termonen, Pekka, *Jyvaskyla Book Fair, Niall Griffiths, April 12, 2008*, YouTube, 12 April 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIDEOID>

Thomas, R. S., *Collected Poems: 1945–1990* (London: Dent, 1993)

Wolfreys, Julian, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic the Uncanny and Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002)

Wolmar, Christian, *Fire and Steam: A New History of the Railways in Britain* (London: Atlantic Books, 2007)

Žižek, Slavoj, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991)