HELP THE WITCH

6 DECEMBER

I have arrived! It feels like more of an achievement than I ever imagined it could. The snow started a little south of Northampton and became heavier all the way from there. A sensible person might have stopped long before that and checked into a hotel, but I am not a sensible person: I think, if there is one thing that this entire endeavour proves, it is that. I don’t know how I got up to the top of the mountain (I have checked the altitude in feet, and it does technically qualify as a mountain). The two routes I’d used before were totally non-navigable in a normal car but somehow the more gentle incline to the east worked out: the snow had not quite settled as thickly there. It still took forty minutes of violently revving in first gear and hanging on to the steering wheel for dear life, though. In the end I had to reverse into the track, then let the car spin back round. If aliens gazed down from above at the patterns I left in

the snow, they might mistake it for a violent, impulsive form of art. But I am here. We are here. Nibbler, A Good Size Cat, and me. Just the three of us, an airbed, a sleeping bag, a kettle and a rucksack. The house feels bigger than I remember, and cold. There’s a lot of space in the top of the rooms, room for another room, really, in each. I find myself looking up into the space a lot. I’m exhausted, so I won’t write more. I fear I might gibber if I do.

1. DECEMBER

My hands are covered in burns. I’ve been running on pure adrenaline for a fortnight, and because of that I never took the time to look at the state of them until this morning, when I was washing them. This might suggest that I had not washed them for several days. I had; I just hadn’t noticed that I had hands. Before I left the cottage in Sussex I lit a giant bonfire, which burned for three days. You can take a dramatic angle on this, but I don’t see it that way. It is true that I did burn some old letters from Chloe, but I also burned far more old phone bills, chequebooks and receipts. I was drawing a line, I suppose, but the themes of the line were largely relocation and confidential waste.

The burns on my hands are not battle scars, they’re namby-pamby, middle-class injuries. But Niall, one of the two removal men, who I sense is not middle class, did glance at the red blisters on my right wrist, and ask if I was OK. He and his colleague, Dan, performed a minor act of heroism to even get the van halfway down the track today. With their time constraints I had to muck in and help with the carrying. My speed and capacity to take weight amazed me, made me re-appreciate those stories you hear about mothers who somehow find the strength to lift entire cars off their children. I’m six foot four but built like a bunch of long, sellotaped-together twigs, so adrenaline is the only explanation for what I’ve achieved in physical terms over the last few days. I have an equal lack of doubt that at some point I’m going to crash, but that point is yet to arrive. All the furniture and boxes are in now, although snow has drenched most of it.

No doubt Niall and Dan don’t blink an eyelid at any of this – they’ve moved all sorts of people to all sorts of places in all sorts of weather – but I did notice them give me a certain kind of look a few times. The look was perhaps at its most noticeable when they said goodbye and wished me the best in my new home. If you drew the look, it might resemble some kind of wilting, half question mark. Was it pity? Bewilderment? A bit of both? I imagine

they saw the cottage in Sussex as a very gentle, safe place and wondered why anyone would abandon it for here. I can see why they might think that, but it is all more complex than that and I am sure I’ve done the right thing. Maybe they were just worried about how tired I looked.

Last night, again, I failed to sleep in the part of the night traditionally designated for sleep. After conking out on top of the bedcovers at eight, I awoke to the sound of the blizzard pelting the thick walls of the house and either Nibbler or A Good Size Cat making a mournful wibbling noise, probably A Good Size Cat. Chloe named him A Good Size Cat because we’d yet to come up with the right name and, when we took him in for neutering, our vet called him ‘a good size cat’. After that, Chloe kept saying, ‘Look at this good size cat,’ or, ‘Where is the good size cat?’ and it kind of stuck. He’s the bigger of the two, as you might think with that name, but he is prone to night terrors. I got up and located them both, squatting nervously on a window ledge, looking out into a night of answerless black, but was surprised to find that the mournful wibbling sound continued, and was coming from neither of their mouths.

The house is joined, being half of a mid-Victorian farmhouse, but next door is currently empty: has been for God knows how long. My nearest neighbour is my

landlord. After about half a mile the track divides, with my building on one side and his on the other, about 700 yards further down into the valley where the trees begin to close in. He is a petless person, a man I do not take for an animal lover. After that, there’s not another house until you reach the next farmhouse, which – though their land abuts my landlord’s – is a full mile away. Soon after this the village gradually begins to materialise in the form of a row of grey pebbledash semis. Having written off ‘neighbour’s pet’ as an explanation, I did admittedly think ‘ghost cat’, but I don’t believe in ghosts and I am tired. The most likely explanation is rats.

I sat on the top stair for a couple of hours, while Nibbler and A Good Size Cat paced anxiously and listened as the noise moved around the walls and ceilings. No doubt I could have used the time more constructively by being asleep, but I also think upon moving to a new house that it’s useful to take some time to get accustomed to all the unfamiliar sounds the place makes, and there are plenty here: the ‘whuooop-whuooop’ of the wind passing through the cooker’s extractor, the eerie tinkle of the thermostat as it resets, the snow pelting the walls, the branch of an overgrown willow thwacking the wall of what will soon be my study, the windy creak of a corrugated door of a barn, and the rats, if that’s what they

are. I made myself a Cup-a-Soup, then read a few chapters of a book about the history of the area, purchased in a charity shop after my first viewing of the house. I spent the final few hours before the slow winter dawn sitting up in bed thinking about the people who built the house for weather like this, building the house in weather like this.

1. DECEMBER

When I first came to see the house, at the beginning of last month, a smattering of leaves still clung to the trees. It was the final mild day of autumn and I broke into a sweat as I climbed to the top of the gritstone edge that acts as a natural architrave for the opposite valley wall. I stripped down to my T-shirt and skipped over stones and decided that the north of our country was no different from the south, besides the fact that it was bigger, more beautiful, and more real. Why would anybody in their right mind not want to live here? But today as I walked to the top of the track, I had difficulty accessing my mental picture of that day; it was impossible to imagine that any of the trees had ever been in leaf. I noticed the bare double sycamore that announced the mouth of the track, and realised more than before how it appeared to resemble a giant living

scarecrow with enormous branch hands reaching up to the sky, about to wreak raging havoc upon an unjust universe.

Over on the adjacent side of the valley the edge was smoked in fog – fog that was all threat, all future, fog that could never be mistaken for mist, with all mist’s nostalgia – and the only other person I spotted was the tenant farmer, laying traps for moles. He called hello to me and I wandered over. He introduced himself as Peter Winfield. He only works here, and lives down in the village. I put him at about my age, and he has a boyishness about him, but his face also speaks of the life he lives: it’s a face full of weather, very little of it over 6° Celsius.

‘So what you do think of him?’ he said. ‘Who?’ I said.

‘Him over there. Old Conkers. T’landlord.’

‘I don’t really know, yet. He seems OK. He doesn’t smile much. I expected the house to be a bit cleaner.’

‘Tight-fisted, he is. I’d watch him if I were you. He owns all of this but he never even looks at it. Stays inside the house all the time.’

The snow stopped mid-morning, but there’s no thaw in evidence and zero chance of getting out in the car. Probably won’t be for several days. I stocked up on food before I left Sussex and have plenty of tins dating from

quite some time ago – many purchased in the Chloe Era by Chloe – but already I am making mental calculations about how long what I have got will last. Can a two-years- out-of-date can of kidney beans be reasonably counted as a meal? I walked down a narrow ravine into the village, looking for sustenance. Beneath my feet, the limestone path felt like a wet tablecloth being pulled from beneath me. The pub was closed, but in the tea room I was served a large plate of beans, scrambled egg, some bread, and half a tomato. I get the impression vegetarian meals will not be easy to come by here. I told the lady in the tea room I had just moved in up the hill. ‘Oh, you should have said!’ she replied. ‘Residents get thirty per cent discount.’

Between the gritstone cottages the streets were corridors of silence, like everyone had shut themselves indoors to hide from a notorious wolf, and when a van door slammed up the road it sounded like an event. The churchyard is vast and all around the village – in fields, in spinneys and copses, even in gardens – are additional graves, marked and unmarked. When the Great Plague arrived here in the 1660s, the residents chose to seal themselves in, in an attempt to not spread it to other villages nearby. The most desolate sight of all is about half a mile outside the west end of the village where, in a field

beneath a landslip, directly under an old oak, seven graves stand alone, enclosed by a wall. It was here that, according to legend, Winifred Cowlishaw – without assistance, in the space of one week – buried her six children and her husband, all of whom had succumbed to the virus. I do not think I have seen a more bleak spot in the whole of this country.

Back at home this evening, I listened to the rats again. I am not sure it’s actually rats. It’s not a collective or various sound: it’s focused, has a persona and a certain autonomy as it goes about its business in the walls and, sometimes, apparently, in that big pocket of empty air at the top of the rooms, where there is space for another room. Also, there’s no scurrying to go with it. Nibbler and A Good Size Cat seem spooked, constantly turning around abruptly at invisible frights. But isn’t that just cats all over, all the time? Outside, the dark is very dark. But in the day, the whiteness is very dark too, sometimes even darker.

10 DECEMBER

The energy crash is finally happening. Last night, I saw the pepper mill move eight inches, all of its own volition. I could barely eat the mushroom risotto I made for

myself without falling face first into it. Afterwards, I yanked my top half into bed, my legs following several yards afterwards, and heard the ghost cat make a new noise, much more questioning in tone. All this means, of course, is that I’m slightly delirious through lack of sleep. I think this is perhaps the intersection where what we call ‘the supernatural’ comes into being: a combination of weather, the visions of abnormally tired people with big imaginations, and an environment where not too much technology or science can infringe. Once you get on top of your sleep, and bring progress and electricity-based frivolity into the picture, the supernatural is banished.

Was I inviting this idea of the supernatural by coming here, alone? Of course I was. I wanted to live in a place without too many explanations, where magic has a chance to breathe. Chloe could never have lived in a place like this. She struggled to live in a place half like this. She avoided the margins, the fuzzy areas. Enjoyed convenience, firm answers about the week ahead. Or – if you look at it another way – did not like to make life hard for herself. This morning, I saw Mr Conkleton go past the window, dragging his bad foot after him. It is just me and him for a mile, nobody else. He still hasn’t fixed the extractor fan, but I didn’t go after him. I was too tired. I alternately dozed and read more about the history of

Grindlow. Still no internet. It will be three weeks, at least, the phone company say. Because of Christmas and all. No matter. More room for magic to breathe.

At college I studied printmaking under a great man: a wide, hairy, big-handed chunk of human bread named Malcolm. He is long dead now. In his spare time, Malcolm carved the most exquisite forest creatures out of wood that he had foraged himself from parts of the South Downs near his home. The last time I ever saw him, on my twenty-fifth birthday, he gave me a wooden owl, and it has accompanied me to every house I’ve lived in since. Before I’d found a spot for almost anything else here, I placed it on the window ledge of the study, but tonight I noticed it had fallen into the wastepaper basket beneath the desk. This was clearly the work of Nibbler, who is getting antsy since I haven’t quite had the confidence to let her out to roam yet. I returned the owl to its rightful place on the window ledge. There is another owl carved on the gatepost of the house and I have to admit this is something that first drew me to the place: I thought the two could be companioned. I am reminded here of something Chloe once said to me during an argument: ‘Why don’t you just fuck off and write a book about owls or something?’ She was very angry at the time and later apologised, and promised she

didn’t mean it. But I actually don’t think it was a terrible suggestion. There are far worse activities a person can partake in than fucking off and writing a book about owls or something.

12 DECEMBER

I moved here because of the wildness of the place, but I also underrated that wildness, perhaps because it is not an edge place. It is not at the end of anywhere. If you drive in any direction from here, before long you will hit a city, and when the cities do appear, they appear abruptly, full of industry and smoke. But it is wild. Behind my back garden, sloping down to the valley, are 300 acres of natural woodland: an undisturbed place, somehow simultaneously overgrown and barren, which I could probably walk for the next month and still not fully know. The skeletons of giant hogweed stand proud, despite the snow, beside a ruined pump house. So much vegetation here smacks of death effigy. Beyond is a horizon where nothing grows. I am starting to feel ringed by something here, something more than snow, something ice hot, but I don’t know what it is. I see it in my mind when I think about where I can go, what I can do, when the snow goes.

It is a barrier, bigger than the snow itself, which stops me getting into the car and reaching the road.

13 DECEMBER

It couldn’t have worked out between me and Chloe. In the end, there were too many differences in what we wanted out of our futures. But am I allowed to say I miss her? One of the things I miss most is the way we fitted together, physically. I don’t simply mean in a sexual sense. I mean that all our shapes were right. We’d just fold and melt into each other. It wasn’t one of those relationships where you found your arm or leg sticking out somewhere inconvenient and yearned to move it. I also miss the sound of her talking to herself, or talking to a cat, in a distant room of the house. I still find myself listening for it here. Peter Winfield has been over with some firewood. He is such a kind man.

15 DECEMBER

The cats have been going into the garden for a couple of days now, but they don’t seem interested in being out

there for long. There’s been a break in the snow and a small thaw, which has opened up patches of soil for them to piss and shit in, and meant that today I was able to risk a drive to Buxton to get food. It’s a town that once seemed high and windbeaten to me – an outpost a little above the world – but seems soft and low now, in context of my new life. I returned and couldn’t find Nibbler, who, I realised, after several worried hours, has discovered a gap at the back of the boiler room, leading to a small recessed space where it is warm to sleep. Before that I’d spent an hour outside, calling her name fruitlessly into the black wind. It feels like the night out there has fangs. Through the gloom I can see the branches of the double sycamore man-tree flailing at the sky. Beyond it are untold numbers of old bones from a different universe, but bones that in fact did their growing only thirteen or fourteen generations from where we are now. There is far, far more mould in the bathroom than I realised. I opened up the cistern today and found thick black goo, with dozens of slugs floating in it. The wind is whuooop-whuoooping furiously through the hood of the cooker. Four months tomorrow I begin my new job in the History department at the university. By then, there’ll be new growth and all this white around will be green. Or will it? It doesn’t seem possible.

Ghosts are weather.

17 DECEMBER

Matthew, who was breaking up a journey to Scotland where he was attending a conference, came to visit yesterday. He parked the car at the top of the track and I trudged up through the snow to meet him. We had a fair bit to talk about, as I hadn’t had chance to say goodbye to him properly before I left Sussex: mostly him filling me in on what had happened on campus since my departure. He commented that the house was amazing and that I was pretty much ‘living in the eighteenth century’, but I thought I saw a few questions in his eyes, and I know he feels that I abandoned him a little with my abrupt departure. He produced his hand lens as we passed the footpath sign pointing to Wentworth’s Well and analysed the light green lichen stuck to the wood, which he informed me was a kind of Cladonia.

The sign is incorrect. Wentworth – first name Richard – is not in fact well; he died in 1712, long after he had finished his stint as the reverend of Grindlow. But in the 1660s, when the plague hit the village to such devastating effect, having arrived from London in a box of cloth sent to a local tailor, Wentworth did stay well while his parishioners died: dozens of them each month. It was his decision to seal the village in, to prevent the spreading

of the disease to neighbouring Derbyshire villages, for which he is remembered as a hero, but which many of the residents might not have felt quite so positive about at the time. In the hot summer of 1666 the contagion increased, and seventy-four villagers died in that July alone, including Wentworth’s wife and two-year-old baby son. Residents of the neighbouring village, Hatherford, left food at a number of sites around the edge of Grindlow, including the spring that was later named after the reverend. For payment, Grindlow villagers left coins. These they soaked in vinegar, as a rudimentary form of sterilisation.

Matthew asked me how the book was going and I admitted I had not yet written a sentence of it. There is plenty of time until I’m back in a full-time teaching job and I feel that a period of faffing is an important part of any big, intense piece of writing, but I had hoped I’d have got properly under way with the book by now. I have a mental barrier with it not unlike the mental barrier that makes me feel that the world beyond the snow and the hills is far away and inaccessible. I told Matthew about the ghost cat – which remained quiet for the duration of his stay – and the carved owl falling into the bin. After he’d left and I’d stripped the bed in the spare room, I noticed that he’d thrown it back in there, just to wind me up, the bastard.

19 DECEMBER

Christmas is out there somewhere, beginning to happen. I am glad to be away from it. Not it so much as the stuff around it. The needless panic, the commercial excess, the small talk centred around the needless panic and commercial excess. I imagine Chloe is out there in it, somewhere. I picture her with a Christmas Person, introducing him to her parents. He doesn’t work in academia. He is helping to wash up and decorate the tree, and makes his own signature drink, which everyone enjoys. He has some books, but only five or six – not the amount of books that might become an impediment when you’re in a relationship with a person. Everyone – not excluding me – is so relieved to see her finally with a Christmas Person.

She’s not in my dreams so much any more, but I dream a lot here. Often, but not always, in the dreams, great violence is about to be done to me. In the most recent, I was walking down a corridor, fumbling for a light switch in impossible blackness. As I reached for the wall for some balance, I felt three fleshless hands violently tickling my ribs. When I wake from these nightmares and I switch my phone on to look at the time, it is always 3.46 or

3.47 a.m. I suspect that once, many years ago, at

3.44 a.m., something very bad happened in this house or in the space where this house now stands. Sometimes when I can wake up, I hear the phantom-cat – or rats, or is it a dog? – noise but it seems a little less keening now, calmer.

1. DECEMBER

Walked to Hatherford today and bought twenty-four packets of crisps. Nineteen of them still exist.

1. DECEMBER

Solstice. White and hard and sharp. It’s over a week since I wrote to Conkleton about the slugs and the mould – also reminding him about the extractor fan – but there has been no response. The shower has started leaking and scalded my thigh yesterday. Water is pouring from the broken rear gutter. I saw him out on the track tonight when I’d emerged from the shower, but by the time I had gone to find him, he had vanished. He doesn’t move quickly, with that bad foot of his, so I walked in the direction of the big house, sure that I would catch him up. It’s a much larger version of my house: same high ceilings, soot-grey bricks

and thick walls. Another owl – the same as the one on my gatepost; a little ugly, if I’m honest – is carved on the arch above the door. Peter Winfield has told me that it’s the family crest: ‘Reet proud of it he is, too. He’s got blazers wi’ it on.’

There were no lights on, although the curtains were open, and I could see a huge manger set up in the living room. I know Conkleton is religious, but I wonder why he’d go to this effort: Peter Winfield told me Conkleton’s wife died three years ago and that his only remaining relative is his son, who lives in New Zealand, and doesn’t tend to visit. Despite the darkness of the house, something told me somebody was there, so I checked on the kitchen side. Peering through the kitchen into the dining room beyond, I could just see a figure that appeared to be Conkleton, standing against the back wall. I knocked on the window, but I couldn’t get his attention. It was as if he was in some kind of trance, pinned to the spot. I did not think he was in any serious danger, though, so I trudged back home. I am so tired and I think I might have a problem with my Achilles tendon. Perhaps everyone gets foot injuries around here? When I arrived home, Matthew called to ask if he’d left one of his turquoise rings anywhere in my spare room. I said I would look, and told him that he was a wanker

for putting the owl in the bin. He told me he had no knowledge of any such thing.

28 DECEMBER

This place – this part of the Peak District – has its own particular winter smell. It followed me on a walk today: a very long one. It’s different from any smell I’ve smelt while walking anywhere else. There is almost nothing of my former home in it. It’s a little woodsmoky, but also tinged with manure and mournful old stone and a hint of Victorian industry. I feel different while within this smell. People are expected to be the same person all their life, but different places make us different people. I’m not talking about the impact of an environment over time; I’m talking about something instantaneous. My hair is different here, my outlook, even my face, maybe. I am more lethargic, which is unlike me. I don’t sleep fully, though, because of the nightmares at 3.44 and my active mind.

I dozed and read and snacked through the festive season, as many people will do, the notable difference being that I did it all alone. For my Christmas meal, I had a bagel smeared with Marmite. I did not mind. It was a very pleasant bagel.

Yesterday I decided the solution to my insomnia is to physically exhaust myself. I walked down the valley, below the snowline, into the limestone gorge, until I was nine full miles away from home, over the border from Dark Peak into White and only by turning around and retracing my steps could I make it back before nightfall. A few festive family walking parties shuffled about nearer the road, but mostly I was alone. I slipped on limestone and fell on top of my camera, amazingly neither breaking it nor me. White Peak limestone makes for less bleak hills than the gritstone of the Dark Peak, but it always feels like it’s getting away from you. In the winter, nothing ever feels certain in life when you’re on top of it. I will do well not to perish as a result of it before spring arrives. Shaken, I passed through a gate, noting the top section of a freshly decapitated deer on the path in front of me: the work, no doubt, of poachers. Its face stayed with me. I could feel the bruise I’d sustained through falling, but as I progressed on the walk, my Achilles pain dissipated.

I got home and sank into a deep bath and thanked myself for changing the sheets in the morning. They felt good against my skin and as I turned and snuggled hard to Chloe, I was reminded of how seamlessly our bodies – my long one, and her tiny one – slotted together against the odds.

I noticed she did not emanate her usual warmth, though. There was purring at the bottom of the bed, near our feet.

‘You’re so cold,’ I said.

‘Can’t help it. Always been that way,’ Chloe said, in what was not her voice.

I turned on the light. The bed was empty. The purring had stopped. The top of the room seemed very large and wastefully utilised.

It’s morning now, and I am benefiting from the novelty of not having woken up from a nightmare at 3.44 a.m. I do not feel alone in the house, though. I don’t think I ever have.

2 JANUARY

I have been thinking more about Winifred Cowlishaw and the Cowlishaw graves. What must it have taken to have done that, bury your whole family, alone, in the space of one week? The question is not how you recover from that, because surely you don’t. The question is how you find a way to carry on and be in the world, even a different world, with very different standards of hardship and suffering from those we have now. The route into the village by road or footpath is deceptive and makes

the graves seem far away, but as the crow flies they’re less than half a mile from here. The cottage beside them, where the Cowlishaw family lived, is long demolished, but were I in this house in the seventeenth century, we’d have pretty much been next-door neighbours: all that lies between us is Conkleton’s place and the untamed, slaloming woodland beyond it. Nothing has come into that space since, not even one of the lead or fluorspar mines that dominate the area.

On my walk today I saw five dead moles nailed to a fence. ‘It’s showin’ off, trophyism, a warning,’ Winfield has told me. He traps and kills them himself, but just to keep their hills under control. He says he’d never do something like that. I told him about the night I saw Conkleton pinned to the wall. He did not look surprised. Winfield said he tries not to go down there. I looked at his face again and saw more weather. It’s an excellent face. Looking good for your age and looking young for your age are often not the same thing.

The village shop is stocking a new jalapeño snack. The four bags I have consumed so far have been quite addictive. These things are often just sold for a trial period, so it’s good to be supportive.

Crows are fucking massive here.

6 JANUARY

This is just a diary and I suspect (in fact, hope) nobody else will ever read it, so – with the knowledge that I’m going to sound like I’ve totally lost it – I might as well come out and say this: I have been hearing the female voice – the one I heard when I thought I felt Chloe beside me in bed – again. I don’t understand everything it says. The words are thick, very North Derbyshire, but also more than just very North Derbyshire. A lot of what the voice says is a mixture of the banal and the incomprehensible. It has asked a couple of times if I am OK. It was only today that I replied for the first time to something it said. I was in bed at the time.

‘Reckon ’im be bringing down the white again tonight.’ ‘You mean it’s going to snow?’

‘Yuss.’

12 JANUARY

What I decided before I came here was that I wanted to write a book about four children, all of whom had starred in a 1960s TV series and subsequently become friends for life. The novel would be about the very different paths

they had taken since, the narrative returning with an update every four years. For a long time I ached to write it, felt nothing about my life would be calm and right until I did. I saw being here, this period before I start my job at the university, as my chance to finally do it. Two years ago, I’d have auctioned a close relative for this freedom. But I have still not written a word. I suspect its window has gone and I might have to just accept that. The motor beneath the project is no longer there. I have written since arriving here, but only in the form of this diary, and notes I have made on Grindlow’s history from the books I have purchased.

Today I read about Benjamin Rowley, a farm lad who lived in Grindlow during the 1660s, and Hannah Barlow, his lover, who lived in Hatherford. Each day the pair would meet at 2 p.m. at the exact halfway point between the villages and stand a hundred yards apart, staring longingly at each other, yearning for the time when the pestilence would pass and they would once again be properly reunited. For thirteen weeks the routine continued, until one day Benjamin did not appear, and Hannah instantly knew that the worst had happened. The following day, she attempted to throw herself from the top of the gorge but her expanding petticoats broke her fall, meaning she emerged only with light bruising.

She eventually lived until eighty-two, having married a butcher from Hatherford.

‘Knew her daughter, I did,’ said the voice, as I closed the book. ‘She were right loose.’

Conkleton has finally been over about the slugs and the mould and the leak and the fan. He does not look well. I told him I’d show him where the problem was and invited him in. He remained on the threshold and told me it wasn’t necessary. He said he would send somebody over to fix it.

16 JANUARY

I am getting out a little more in the car, in these days where the snow has turned more patchy, but not going far. I still feel that invisible threshold stopping me. I do not dare go on a proper day trip, never want to get back too late. I don’t like leaving the cats on their own as they’re still jittery, but I also feel the house as a stone presence inside me that cannot be neglected for long. I edge up the hill, coming the back way, nervous of black ice. I have skidded a couple of times. It never doesn’t seem like an achievement to make it to the top. Sometimes I see hares skittering across the icy fields. I put the rubbish out today and lost my footing. I stayed upright only by grabbing on

to the rear windscreen wiper of my car. It part-survived. It still cleans half of the rear windscreen.

There are ledges to the land here. There is the ledge that you think is high, where the weather changes, where a day can be entirely different from the way it is down in the valley. Then there is the ledge above that. Sometimes I’m driving along the main road and I look up at those higher ledges and wonder what kind of crazy person would live up there, then remember the answer is me.

She says her name is Catherine.

21 JANUARY

I remember that this was the time of year where I felt it all turn over, back in Sussex. The first daffodils would be out, maybe a few primroses, even. There are snowdrops down near the river now, but not many. I have been online and found myself searching for photographs of this place in spring and summer, in need of hard evidence of their existence. My firebowl is in the garden, where the movers left it. It is half full of snow. Its existence is pure comedy. I can’t foresee any time I will get to use it.

Walking back from Grindlow with a multipack of pickled onion Space Raiders, I noticed an odd wooden

shape built into the wall of a cottage – probably early 1800s – on the east side of the village. I realised on closer inspection that it was an old pillory. You initially read the story of Grindlow and you get an impression of friendliness and support from the other population centres in the vicinity – the food left at the wells, and the boundary stones, an acknowledgement of the selflessness that Wentworth instilled – but it’s not that simple. Long after the plague had passed, residents were often treated with suspicion. Grindlow residents who attempted to enter Sheffield were still often pelted with pebbles and sharp sticks. Until well into the 1700s it was thought of as extremely bad luck to let a Grindlow woman near your sheep or cattle.

24 JANUARY

Outside, the night has fangs again. I felt it in my gums as I put food out for the birds, who are desperately hungry. A long icicle has formed on the gatepost, under the carved owl: a potential disposable murder weapon. If it wasn’t for the floodlight on Winfield’s barn, there’d be nothing to light up this night for over a mile. The wind keeps setting the floodlight off, and it illuminates the snow, meaning a rhombus of white-yellow brightness comes through

the gap in the bedroom curtains. There is purring in the bottom-left corner of the room, where I can’t see. I am not quite asleep when I hear her.

‘Feel better. Now that you’re here.’ ‘Why?’

‘Make me stronger. Didn’t like last winter. Felt lonely.’ ‘What about summer?’

‘Wasn’t here. Never am.’ ‘Not at all?’

‘No.’

‘Where were you?’ ‘I don’t know.’

‘What about in autumn?’ ‘Some of it.’

‘Spring?’ ‘Some of it.’

‘You have never been back in the bed, after that first time.’

‘Not fair. Not fair on you. Not fair on me.’

28 JANUARY

It was Mark Avery who first alerted me to the job in Sheffield at the university. We’d kept in touch ever since

my early days working at ULU. He’s a smooth-cheeked, boyish man, still terrified of relationships at thirty- seven, flick-quiffed, eternally excitable about sport. He’s been trying to get me out for a drink ever since I arrived in the Peak but it’s been difficult, with the snow and everything. Yesterday, though, I got the train from Hatherford and met him for a pint on the leafy margins of the city. He asked me what Grindlow was like, and said he’d heard it was kind of dark. The booze went to my head pretty quickly, so when he told me he and his new girlfriend, Carla, were going out to a gig on the other side of town, I took little persuading to join them. She’s a few years younger than him and plays in an all- female punk band.

Later, after the band had finished and the DJ took over, my energy was still up – higher than it had been for weeks – and the rest of Carla’s bandmates arrived, each of them heavily eye-shadowed and immaculate in gaudy patterned dresses. A glam-punk look that is heavily in debt to the past but not quite of it. ‘This is Jeff – he lives in a haunted house!’ Mark barked over the music, by way of introduction. I got talking to Rosie, the drummer, who works part time in a new bakery in town and was at least 50 per cent covered in sequins, and soon there were shots and she was asking me if I was single. I told her I

was. ‘I’m not really looking for anything at the moment, though,’ I burbled. ‘I’m pretty happy as I am. Also, I’m a little broken.’ At which point, with the assertive statement, ‘You’re not broken – nobody is broken,’ she planted a confident, lingering kiss on my lips.

It was a long time before any taxis arrived outside the venue, and while we waited Rosie made some practical and persuasive arguments for me to not try to get back to Grindlow and to stay at her place instead: the fact that Mark and Carla had long since vanished into the night; the black ice on the lane leading up to the top of the mountain; the comfiness of the new memory-foam mattress on the bed of her flatmate, who was currently in Greece; the breakfasts at the new vegan café at the end of her road. I kissed her once more, gave her my number, and put her in the first cab that arrived. I had to wait another three quarters of an hour before I found a taxi that would agree to take me to where I live, and even then, when we climbed the mountain itself, he refused to take me up to the final ledge. ‘Never in January, mate,’ he said. ‘Not a chance. You’ll not find one cabbie in this city who’ll take you up there.’ I stumbled and skidded and sloshed my way home, bidding a final farewell to my suede boots in the process.

I woke less than four hours later to the agonised sounds of one of Winfield’s cattle giving birth. My

clothes, which I’d left strewn about the landing, were in a neat pile outside my bedroom door. The bird feeders were both empty, so I went outside to top up their feed, my head rattling in my skull. There was still a little bit of snow in the firebowl. The carved owl sat neatly on top of it.

29 JANUARY

‘Are you angry?’ I ask her. We’re in the kitchen. Me: washing the pots. Her: somewhere less specific, mostly in the underutilised top part of the room.

‘No.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yuss. Not with you. Always angry, though. A bit.’ ‘Will you tell me about it sometime? I’d like it if you

did.’

‘Maybe. Yuss.’

‘And what about the owl?’ ‘Don’t like it.’

‘You don’t like owls?’ ‘Yuss. No. Yuss.’

‘You just don’t like representations of owls in art?’ ‘Yuss.’

4 FEBRUARY

Two of Winfield’s lambs died today. It is nothing unusual for him, at this time of year, but it’s still deeply sad. In the coldest March of recent years he arrived one morning to find all his sheep facing the wall, and an entire field of their offspring frozen to death. He is hardened to it, but I still impulsively asked him if he fancied going into the village for a pint. I’ve not asked before, as I always assume he’s working too hard for that kind of thing, and that after a day on the farm all he wants to do is get back home to his wife and his boys. But he surprised me by accepting.

Behind us at the bar a fat-necked racist bemoaned the multicultural shops on his recent trip to London, and joke- seriously chided his drinking companion for not looking into his eyes as they clinked glasses. A little threat sizzled in the air around them. The bar room smelt of meat and damp and wood. Winfield talked about the ‘shit weather corridor’ we are in here, which comes down from the north, and often manages to miss the flanking villages and hills, or at least never hit them nearly as hard. He’d heard next week was going to be bad, and was making a new warm space in the barn for the lambs. He said that whenever he meets someone new he looks at their hands to see if they’re small,

which can be useful at lambing time. It’s an ingrained habit, hard to stop. ‘How did you rate mine?’ I asked. ‘Didn’t quite make the grade, I’m afraid, yoth,’ he replied. He said I was doing well up there. Some of the other tenants who’d come up here in winter hadn’t even managed to hack it this long: they’d gone to stay with relatives, or left altogether.

When Winfield returned from the bar with our second pint, he was accompanied by a much older man, with enormous sideburns. He introduced him as Norman, his dad. Norman farmed for years on the other side of the ridge and looks how I assumed farmers ceased to look in about 1965. He is eighty-three – older than I’d taken him for – and has lived in the area all his life. He was a first- hand witness to the Grindlow air crash in the terrifyingly cold winter of 1947; listened to the plane go over his head in the fog, then the impact. ‘You could hear t’ice cracking everywhere in t’trees that year,’ he said. ‘When you took your coat off it stood up all by itsen.’ Had he met my landlord? ‘Aye, I’ve met him. He’s not a proper person. Woke up from t’first day with everything and never learned how to appreciate it. Bad news, that family. Always ’ave been. Owned everything round ’ere for ever. Course, it’s just him now, after she died, a few years back. There’s his son, too, but he won’t come back from abroad. Don’t know what will happen to the place after he’s gone.’

8 FEBRUARY

Phone call from my mum, who wants to know why I have posted her a carved owl covered in bubblewrap. I told her it wasn’t permanent, just for safekeeping. ‘Could it not have waited?’ she asks. She said she is worried about me, up here, all alone. I told her it’s no big deal. What about people in the northern provinces of Canada? What about people on mountains in Scotland, in January, in the seventh century?

Text message from Mark, inviting me to a pub quiz in Sheffield. I decline. I am worried about this weather that’s coming in. Just little flurries of snow so far, but the top ledge of the mountain road is still dicey from the last lot. The council’s attitude to gritting seems to be that over a certain altitude it should be done on a self-serve basis. Catherine is quiet today but, I sense, more peacefully so. It’s a month and a half since solstice, but the day is still a slit of light, bookended by big black cushions.

10 FEBRUARY

I saw them through the back window, coming up over the ridge, with their dogs and guns. A Good Size Cat was

out there and I hurried him in quickly. Locked the cat flap. I couldn’t quite see what they were carrying: rabbits, certainly, something longer, stringier, maybe a hare. I moved to the front of the house, keen to get confirmation of their departure. Their faces were hard and sharp. They lingered around the barns for a while, talking to Conkleton. He stuck around for a few minutes after they left, stroking gates, inspecting barns, ostentatiously showing to himself that everything was still in order, like a friendless child playing at being king. He steered noticeably clear of this place.

‘Is he scared of you?’ I asked her.

‘He’s scared of it all. Scared of himself.’ ‘Do you ever go to his house, too?’ ‘Sometimes. But that’s Joan’s territory.’ ‘Joan?’

‘Sister.’

13 FEBRUARY

The fog is marauding on the other side of the valley this morning, angry and rampant. Sometimes it will be there for three or four whole days without lifting. But if you looked back from there to this side, it would no doubt

be thicker. When I’ve walked over there and the view has been clear, it’s amazing how hidden this place is. The system of ledges and copses makes the spot almost impossible to pick out. It’s a vast valley that has totally redefined the word ‘hill’ for me. I find myself thinking a lot about all that wild ground in the middle, where the derelict pump house is. It’s been so left to itself that it has brewed its own atmosphere. The hunters – and me – are really the only people who go down there. I don’t like the thought of them doing their shooting, asserting their bullshit supremacy, but I don’t think they are winning. I think the valley is still winning. It has too much strength. It is a primeval strength that scares me, but the fear is different from my other common fears: the prospect of getting a speeding ticket, or hurting a person’s feelings, or falling terminally ill, or losing a loved one. It’s an important and timeless and necessary fear, with no anxiety associated with it.

15 FEBRUARY

‘I haven’t asked you about the cat.’ ‘Not mine. Came with the house.’ ‘But I assumed, what with . . .’

‘That’s just it. People assume too much. Life’s big problem.’

I resist the urge to add, ‘. . . and death’s?’ I don’t want to be rude.

17 FEBRUARY

The house was built in 1837. I have decided that it happened in winter but have no evidence that it did, other than the fact that winter has become all I associate this area with, and the actual raw materials of the house were blatantly picked out with the kind of winters you get up here in mind. The building probably seemed a little show-offy at the time, purely due to the size of its rooms, but in a dour way that mirrors the meteorological environment: it’s a house that smacks of gritting your teeth and toughing it out, of scant humour, all of it black. A blizzard pelted the walls tonight and I was glad of their thickness, as almost two centuries of residents before me must also have been. This spell of extreme weather – or rather, even *more* extreme weather – has been longer in coming than we were informed on the news, but it has not been overhyped. The cats – the two I can see as a corporeal presence, anyway – look genuinely bewildered.

The scene outside the front door is as frightening as something pristine can be. My car is totally invisible, a lump of snow notable only for being larger than nearly all the other lumps of snow around it. The flakes are still falling. They’re not even flakes. They’re ready-made snowballs.

I have worked it out, and I think I have ten days’ worth of food, if I go easy on the crisps. I can feel Catherine watching me as I cook. She sees me make space amidst the fresh chillis, peppers and tomatoes and carefully drop my eggs into the pan, and I can tell she finds it all a bit needless and elaborate. I’ve noticed that she’s talking in a different way: her sentences are clearer. I wonder if it’s from speaking to me a lot, listening to me on the phone, or hearing the radio. I have got into the habit of leaving Radio 4 on for her while I’m out. By the looks of it, she won’t hear Radio 4 for a while.

19 FEBRUARY

I thought today of a story I overheard in the post office during my first few days here. A lady from the village – she must have been at least in her mid-eighties – was talking about one winter here in her youth when the snow

was so extreme that she and her husband could only get down the hill for food by crawling through the drifts on their hands and knees. It seemed preposterous at the time, an exaggerated recollection from an unrecognisable age. Today I can believe it. I’ve just been out to do the bins and the birdseed and it’s like a whole different planet out there. The dark white light of December and January is history. Now it’s all blasted silver. Your whole body squints as you fight your way through it. The double sycamore man-tree looks like it’s drowning, not raging, as it waves its endless arms at the sky. The relief as you shut the front door on it is monstrous.

We keep the fire going all day with more of Winfield’s wood, and we tell each other stories. She tells me the cat prefers Joan to her.

‘Does it have a name?’ I ask. ‘Cat,’ she says.

21 FEBRUARY

When she tells me her surname I immediately realise I knew it all the time. ‘Not . . .?’ I reply. ‘No,’ she says. ‘Daughter?’ I say. ‘Granddaughter,’ she replies. Not all of the children died in that Satanic week in that most Satanic

of years, 1666 – that’s what people forget. One baby – Josephine – lived and, with her, Winifred carried on. It was sympathy and support that kept her in the village, stopped her from starting a new life elsewhere, which might have been a more sensible option. Neighbours cooked and washed for her. But over the years sympathy gradually thawed out, then froze into suspicion – much more coldly by the time Winifred had died, and Josephine was living with two young daughters of her own. It was less about the Cowlishaws than it was about the village itself: its need to unshackle itself from its own recent past. When residents visited other places, there was name-calling, a stigma, a taint. A grudge seemed to be held, even though it made no sense. Surely the surrounding villages should hold the opposite of a grudge, after the suffering that Wentworth had saved them from, with his decision to seal Grindlow off? But it felt like a new, harder, less forgiving era.

‘Even then?’ I ask. ‘Even then,’ she says.

How, I wonder, can eras always do this, keep seeming harder and less forgiving than the previous one, yet never reach a peak, unsurpassable hardness, without mercy or kindness?

People looked at Catherine and Joan, and they were reminded of the plague years. It didn’t help that illness

was their speciality. They’d learned the remedies from Josephine, as she had learned them from Winifred before that. What comfrey can do to help to heal broken bones. The relationship between nettles and the blood. How to apply yarrow to a cut. People had a conflicted relationship to the cottage on the hill, outside the village, a steaming, pungent house full of medicated goo. They went there for poultices and remedies, but they often kept quiet about it. In spring Catherine and Joan headed through the woods to the stream bordering the big farm. Sometimes trespassing was necessary to get to the places where the Lady’s Smock and ramsons grew most abundantly, but what was trespassing? Then was not now, with its Ordnance Survey order. Paths were a debate.

The sisters were spotted a few times, but it never really mattered until one year early in the new century, when several of the Conkleton cattle were struck down. It was a harsh, late dragging winter, where almost nothing came up in the hedgerow. Lambs died in more abundance than ever. Then the son, the big family favourite, the one born into it all with so much to lose, out riding on the sharp bit of the ridge, was flung. It was later agreed that the mare in question would not have flung anyone, least of all him, not under normal circumstances. There was no way it could happen. The body was not found until the next

day. Blood had soaked the front of his blazer. An owl, once all grey, was half red.

23 FEBRUARY

The absolute coldest. They say −16°C, with windchill. And that’s at the edge of the village. I think you could safely take away another three degrees from that, up here on the ledge. I am using my laptop to heat my feet: a second, electronic hot-water bottle, to add to the one on my lap. Winfield’s wood has all gone, and I do not want to trouble him for more. He’s coming up here every day still, but only to check on the sheep in the barn. No way you can work in this. I have not seen Conkleton for days. I have replied to only two of the text messages I have received during the last week: the one from my dad, asking if I am OK up here on the mountain, and the almost identical one from my mum, also asking if I am OK up here on the mountain. I will get around to responding to the others soon, when I have a moment. They are as follows.

1. *Just wanted to say it was really nice meeting you the other day. Let me know if you fancy a coffee when you are next in Sheffield. Rosie x*
2. *Hey fella. Wanted to check you are ok out there. It is pretty bad here right now and I heard it’s worse where you are. Please holler if you need anything. Mark.*
3. *Your latest O2 bill is now available to view online.*
4. *Shit. It must be pretty scary up there right now. Hope you are OK. Matthew.*
5. *Open mic tonight at café in Nether Edge. Might wander up. You’re probably snowed in, out there in the haunted house, but just thought I’d mention it. Rosie.*

25 FEBRUARY

Found a jar of olives at the back of the mug cupboard. Result! In less salutary news, I cannot eke out the cat litter any longer. Nibbler and A Good Size Cat are refusing to go and do their business outside, so I have been out with the shovel, cleared some snow, and scraped some frozen soil into their tray. They will just have to use that, when the ice drips off it, until I can venture out again in the car, if that ever happens.

‘What do you think of the world now?’ I ask her. ‘It’s the same.’

‘Surely you can’t think that? So much has changed. So much progress.’ I hold up my phone: still switched off, as it has been for the last thirty hours.

‘Humans are still the same.’ ‘You think so?’

‘They still need something to hate. They still operate in packs. They repeat sayings, like sheep. When something is said about someone enough times by enough people, it becomes a fact, whether it is true or not.’

‘What about the cottage? Is it still there?’ ‘No. Not even a brick.’

‘Was it here? Where we are now?’ ‘No. Half a mile.’

‘So why are you here instead?’

‘You ask a lot of questions. Men didn’t, in my day.’ ‘So people are different, after all?’

27 FEBRUARY

There has been a thaw over the last day. I can see a central dividing line of meltwater coming down the track. But it’s creating a new kind of slippiness, on top of the ice. I do not think I will attempt to get in the car yet. Winfield’s dad has been here, helping him with the lambs. He brought me a casserole made by his wife. I did not have the heart to tell him I don’t eat meat. We could see some snowdrops just showing their heads

above the ice on the side of the track, beneath the wire fence.

‘They’re amazing things,’ he observed. ‘They’ll thrive under snow and ice, but if it’s warm and dry, they won’t grow. You can’t tell me that can be explained. That’s not just nature. There’s something more going on there.’

My foot aches and my hair is a pile of straw.

1 MARCH

They came for them at the last moment that dusk was still dusk, carrying burning sticks. Around thirty in total, two of them on horseback at the helm. All men, except for one near the rear. The man on the front horse wore a jacket with an owl sewn into it. She hadn’t been ready – neither of them had – but when it happened, she felt a wave of acceptance come over her, like she had known all along that it was coming.

Joan struggled more. Jars and pots were kicked over. A chunk of her hair could still be seen on the floor weeks later, until sparrows finally forged their way in through the hole in the roof and used it for their nest. By 4 a.m. it was all over. It ended on the top of the hill, and the light from the fire was such that she could see right down the

valley to the new big house, whose walls were now almost complete. The man who was going to live there had once come to her at night with stomach pains, and she had sent him away with a remedy. He had not been back, so she had made the deduction that it had been successful.

‘Why don’t I meet her? Joan?’

‘You have. She’s different from me. She doesn’t talk.

She has been here less lately.’ ‘My nightmares?’

‘Yuss.’

‘I’m so tired all the time.’

‘I’m sorry. My fault, a bit. You won’t be, soon.’

5 MARCH

It’s different down in the valley. It’s hard to explain exactly how it works to somebody who’s not lived up here. A person who knew that I’d moved here might drive along the river road and think, ‘This is where Jeff lives,’ but they’d be incorrect. I live on top of the mountain and that is a different thing. I could live in an entirely different country, and it might have more in common with the valley than this place does. Down there the big freeze is already a distant memory. People are sitting on the rocks in the woodland, eating pots

of yoghurt, with their sleeves rolled up. A woodpecker is doing a roll on its wooden drum to herald the lighter days. Up here, though, the fangs in the air remain. Snow bones are clinging stubbornly to the fields. The light is still dark white. I watch the forecast, anxiously, every day.

Yesterday, Mark and Carla arrived unannounced with a huge Le Creuset pot of homemade soup. ‘Bloody hell! Grizzly Adams!’ said Mark, as I opened the door. I think I might have talked too much, expending all my stored-up voice. Carla mentioned her friend was leaving a two-bed terrace on the north-west side of Sheffield, which was up for rent. ‘Not that I’m assuming you’d be looking,’ she said. ‘We just thought in some ways it might be easier.’ She said it was a very up-and-coming neighbourhood. Some great pubs. Rosie lived just around the corner, too. Did I remember Rosie? I said I did, then asked them if they knew the actual statistics for how many Grindlow villagers died in 1666: an average of twenty-one per week. Twenty-one! When they had left, the house felt very quiet. Catherine is out, I think.

7 MARCH

More blackbirds are arriving every day. I can’t get the seeds and fat balls out there for them quick enough. I remember

the first day I came here and explored the village. I stood outside the pub, consulting my map and noticed a blackbird puffed up, beside my feet, quivering. I walked on. I have often looked back and felt there was something I should have done at that moment. But what? ‘Maybe not move to a haunted mountain?’ I can hear Matthew saying. When I got back from the village today there was a bag of firewood waiting outside my front door. I thanked Winfield, but he said it had nothing to do with him. Later, when I was closing the living-room curtains, I spotted Conkleton limp by, and, uncharacteristically, he waved.

9 MARCH

‘Do you blame him for it?’ ‘No.’

‘But he is in some way part of what happened to you?

A remnant of it?’ ‘Yes.’

‘And you’ll be here until he’s gone?’

‘We’ll be here after that. That doesn’t end it.’ ‘So you’re not here to hurt him?’

‘No. That’s not why we’re here. We will always be here. We need to be.’

‘It’s not revenge, then?’

‘It’s much more complicated than that. But we have to be here. It’s part of the balance. People want simple explanations. That’s another one of the big problems in life.’

Again, I resist adding, ‘. . . and in death?’

11 MARCH

I can picture it quite vividly. It’s that glorious intersection of season and sunlight when the leaves throw their warm shapes on the pavements, making them less prosaic places to be. We’ve been walking for two hours and haven’t realised it, and we’re in a new corner of the city that neither of us even knew was here. If you looked at it practically, you’d say slow down, don’t run out of the good stuff: we’ve been telling it all too quickly, when really there’s months to do it, years maybe. But one topic of conversation leads feverishly to the next. We grab each other’s arms a couple of times, and it’s pure enthusiasm, nothing affectedly flirty. It’s not that we’re pretending to like all the same things. We’re not that green. But it feels like we’re agreeing on the topics we disagree on, because we’ve established an initial kind of agreement in the angle

that we look at everything, and it’s making us look at our differences more open-mindedly.

She checks the time and says shit, she has to go, and it already feels painful, the eleven and a half hours until next time, even though this time – the time before next time – isn’t yet over. And you know it won’t always be like this. It might not even be a quarter like this. Something will come along, an obstacle, maybe not even created by us, and it will make everything harder. But is that a reason not to be here at all, not to even begin?

I turn back to my phone, and delete the text message I have started to compose.

13 MARCH

‘Jeff. Oh my God, it’s you again. You just will not stop calling, will you?’

‘Hi. I’m sorry. I’ve had a lot on.’

‘Consorting with the ghosts? I guess it must be quite hard to get signal up there too, what with that big haunted phone mast at the top of the mountain?’

‘So I was wondering. You mentioned a while ago, about maybe doing something. Getting a drink. Might that offer still stand?’

‘Hmm. I dunno. I suppose I could bring myself to open the offer up again, despite the fact that you vanished off the face of the earth without saying a word.’

‘When would be good for you?’ ‘Friday isn’t too bad.’

I look at the weather on the computer screen in front of me. The yellow symbols.

‘Can we say next week? How about Thursday?’

‘OK. If you sure you’re actually real. Are you a real person? Tell me that, Jeff. Are you? Are you real?’

‘I think so. Most of the time.’

15 MARCH

It’s coming in again, from the north, straight down the Shit Weather Corridor. I can see it less in the sky and more in the colour of the space between the sky and the ground, and a feeling in the air. It’s like when you’re in a room and you realise you’ve left the fridge open, before you’ve actually checked and got backup visual evidence to prove that the fridge is open. But I can feel that something’s turned over, too. Near the dry-stone wall beyond the garden, where some of last week’s snow still hides, through the gap in it which weather or sheep or the foot

hunt made or some combination of all three made, there’s a single primrose. Maybe this will be the last of the snow and, if it’s not, the lot after it will be. If I listen closely to my bones, I can know it. I just have to wait it out.

Before the first flurry assaults the north wall of the house, I walk out over the back field, avoiding the really rough bit of ground where the old roots, as if sentient, snag and lick at your legs. There are no public rights of way here, not for another mile. Paths are still a debate. I turn east, up the last bit of hill, to the very highest point of the whole valley. Some of Winfield’s sheep are permitted to go semi-nomad up here on the spongy moor turf, feasting on small mountains of hay that steam from their molten core, even in this biting cold. A little blue- orange pouting mouth of light going down over the rock edge on the other side is staving off the gloom. From the top I can see the remains of a Saxon cross, then down the valley, past a vast eighteenth-century manor house, to the kink in the river. I turn back for home and my home comes into view: a big grey monster, bulky and mean and alone. Nobody could have been thinking about calming anybody down when they made it.

Night is coming in now and I’ve not left any bulbs on. But in the lower window I can see the comforting light from the fire. I will walk towards that orange glow

for minutes before any detail about the scene around it emerges. It’s just a window gently full of fire. It’s a scene that could be from any point in a long, long time. If you’d been dropped here out of nowhere, you’d be able to predict nothing about what else you’d find in there. You’d just see the light, and follow it.

