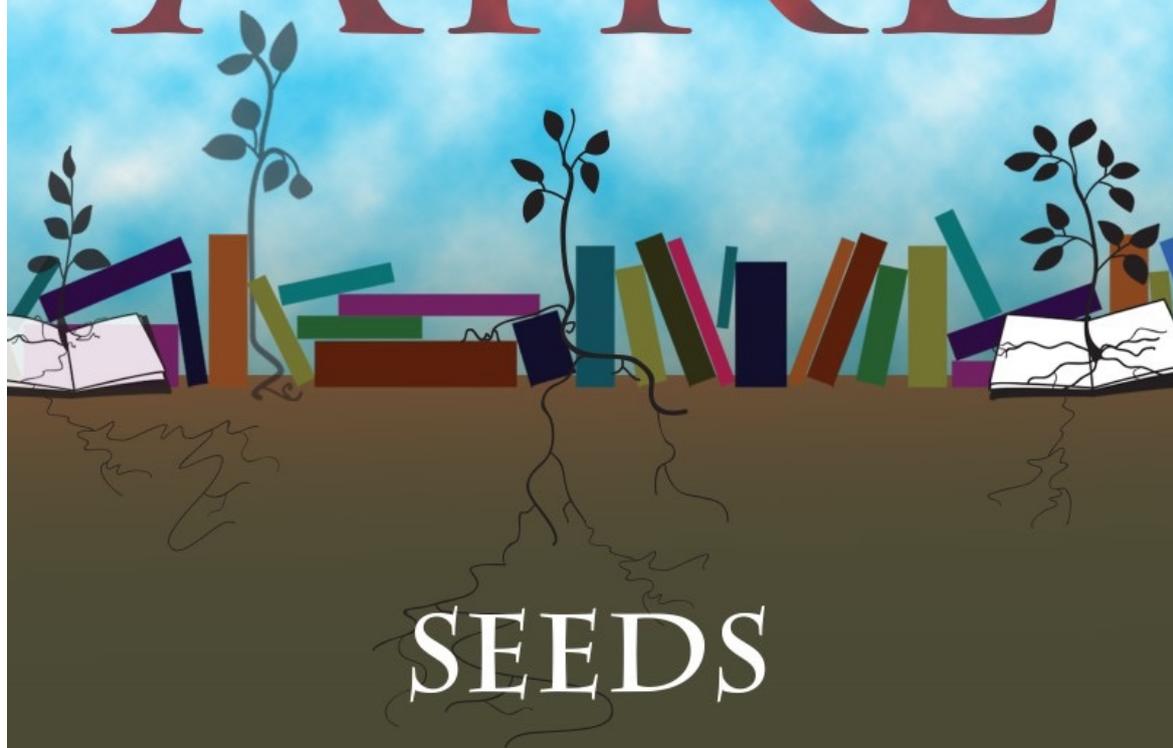


IAIN AIRE



An Anthology of Short Stories

Seeds

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Baptism of Fire

Where had the wide-eyed, apple scrumping choir boy of Witchford church gone? What happened to those cider summer days: lying in water meadows: chewing a grass stalk: dreaming into the blue haze, at one with the swooping shadow of the deadly Peregrine, hunting food for its young in the church tower?

Mungo Plover's foot slipped off the Avro's fuselage step. He was 19 years old. A pilot on his maiden posting to the Western Front. It was January 1918. He had logged 36 hours training, exceptional for a novice flier but it counted for little in this first taste of air combat.

He staggered, teetering from the adrenalin rush that had deserted him. Mungo ripped off his leather flying helmet and goggles and flung them away. His vision remained blurred from the shock and drunken euphoria of survival. Unlike his proudly named Avro, the 'Peregrine'; it's life bleeding away. Arterial engine oil spraying out from the bullet-riddled cowling, turning the winter mud into a cloying slurry. But for Mungo's fierce deathlike grip on the edge of the open cockpit, it would have sucked him down into hell. He felt shame. The callous eye of the hand-painted falcon's head followed his feeble efforts and mocked his earlier arrogance. The symbol no longer infused courage but reminded him of his abject failure to match up to the raptor's reputation as the deadliest hunter in the skies.

Mungo gasped trying to still the dizziness and rising nausea. His head was crowded out with fearful memories. Blinding, choking, smoking oil. Ripping holes that appeared without warning all around him. Flapping, tearing wing fabric. Broken spars and snapping wires. His precious Peregrine falling apart. Mungo's killing machine transformed in seconds into a heavy, unresponsive carcass. A plummeting death trap. His arms ached from the fight with the manic joystick. Somehow he found his airfield.

Three Avros had taken off at dawn – six brothers in arms - into the bitter cold hoar frost and fog, swooping up into the bright sunlit heights; full of bravado. Thirty minutes later Mungo's was alone, his smoking Peregrine in its death throes. He avoided the clawing airfield's perimeter trees, landing on the brown joke for a grass strip, slewing sharply. The left hand under-carriage cracked and collapsed. The propeller, anchored into the mud, the forward motion tipping the Avro up into a somersault but at the last moment gravity pulled it back from a pilot killing crash. The tail crumpled on impact as it fell backwards

Mungo shot a quick look at Tom his navigator, immediately regretting it. There was a body but no head. Reeling away from the smoking twin seat aircraft he could barely move his deadened feet: freezing cold and sweating at the same time. Nothing seemed to work. Every part of him was trembling, trapped within his heavy flying coat. Mungo's frozen flying garb was holding him upright. He sicked up bile and fell forward into blackness.

Witchford was a stranger's memory, it was no longer Mungo's: an innocent baptised by the inferno of war. He had used 30 minutes of his 18 hour life expectancy, of a Royal Flying Air Corp pilot's life.

Flashback

Emma had discovered death and time were unforgiving spectres haunting the relentless countdown of flashbacks to the cataclysm that had torn her life apart.

19:25

She stole another furtive glance at the flight departure board, addicted to the fleeting ‘sands of time’. Emma shouldn’t have come back but flying was – had been her life. A life that had held so much exotic promise. But it was another life: another Emma: a youthful innocence she no longer recognised. Was she burnt out at 26? Adrenalin surged, spiking the free fall of her sanity and the terrifying thought she had little resolve left to hold on to. She gulped, took a deep breath and rubbed her face vigorously with his one bare hand, the other protected by a skin-coloured cotton glove. And desperately tried to break the destructive cycle: breathe deep, five times they said: drop your shoulders they said: focus on the now and the positive: don’t worry about things you can’t control. Emma closed her eyes in defeat, how many well-intentioned PTSD metaphors had been imprinted on her – a persistent rhythmic pattern to reformat her brain.

19:26.

Despairingly Emma could not frustrate her obsession: four minutes to the first anniversary. A deadline with the past - never to be forgotten or forgiven. One more twist of destiny’s knife.

With two colleagues, she had earlier welcomed 400 passengers through Gate 32 onto flight ET002: the 2032 Airbus 300-300 flight for Dubai. It had been a temporary distraction, a reprieve from the raw emotion and a torrent of memories that plagued her waking hours and disrupted her sleep. However, amongst the travelling elation on display: anxious nervous eyes: fraught parents collecting their brood and excited flocks of ‘hens’ anticipating holiday excess, there was a corner of Emma’s mind where the noise and stress was a dark echo of fear that preyed upon herself belief: her shame.

Now the boarding rush was over, the rest of the team were on the aircraft settling the animated patrons, leaving Emma alone to check in the laggards. The airport departure lounge was calming down with most of the peak early evening flights cleared for take-off. Through the airport’s great glass walls, she looked down from her upper floor position across the nightfall vista of the aircraft stands, apron and runways that were lighting up with a multitude of colours. Like a child’s model, the remote tableau of floodlit planes, refuel tankers, baggage handlers and security vehicles would break into a well-orchestrated dance before falling back into a shadowed stasis.

The first of Emma’s late, breathless passengers rushed towards the gate, finishing his can of beer, a student, backpack slung across one shoulder. He casually throws the guilty evidence for his lateness into the nearby waste bin. Emma smiled reassuringly. “Good evening, sir. Ticket, please.” Her automaton discipline covering irritation with the customer’s poor time keeping that would additionally pressure the flight’s aircrew to mitigate the impact of the delay.

Flustered, the young man’s overly polite response attempts to distract Emma from the final call that had named and shamed his late timekeeping. “Evening. How are you doing?”

“Fine: thank you.... Mr Trent,” Emma confirmed the passenger’s identity by a glance at the boarding pass. “You?”

“Good as.”

The young man relaxed, relieved to have made it to the Gate. The boarding machine’s green light and tonal response confirmed the customer’s transaction. Emma hands back the boarding card stub. “Have a good flight Mr Trent.” The banality of her reply already lost on the student who was walking through the Gate anticipating the in-flight, long haul benefits of alcohol and entertainment.

19:28.

The final customer appeared. A disdainful, smartly suited businessman, distracted by a call that he briefly interrupts to sweep his mobile across the consol. Emma recognised the confidence of a seasoned air traveller and lets him take momentary control. The consol stridently squawks red, the flashing alarm shocking Emma: screaming in her mind: draining her skin of colour: torn between two worlds: incandescent, shrill confused memories: the relative quiescence reality of the departure gate.

The customer breaks off his call again, annoyed at the delay in receiving clearance to board before he notices Emma’s ghostly pallor. “You ok?”

She scrambles back behind her professional demeanour and training as she did a year ago in those last fateful minutes. Emma strokes a loose lock of hair back from her face, a habitual mannerism she discovered has a gentle opiate affect. “Yes. Sorry, sir. Long day.” She smiles enigmatically, ignoring the enquiry forming on the man’s lips. “Emergency aisle seat Mr Brendon. You are ready to assist the air crew in an emergency, if required?”

The customer hesitates, sensing an issue, unaware that the irony of the ‘safety’ statement has nearly broken through Emma’s facade that is masking the neurotic disintegration of her personality. But the persistent, disembodied voice on his mobile over rides Mr Brendon’s misgivings. He nods his affirmation to assist and reluctantly accepts Emma’s assertion. Moving away he gives Emma one last sceptical glance before disappearing through departure Gate 32, as others did before, as Emma did - into history. Brendon finishes his call, his mind now focussed on more immediate matters; who he would sit next to for the next seven hours and whether he would find space for his carry-on luggage near his allocated seat. His self-inflicted problem irritated him. Had he arrived earlier he could be smugly watching other passengers frazzled efforts to locate overhead storage space.

19:29

One more minute: gripping the console to hold herself upright Emma lets out a deep sigh. She can no longer resist the rip of time. Terrifying, confused visions break out from the past: suffocating, acrid burning plastic, blinding smoke: explosive blistering heat. The horrific transfiguration of passengers, their survival instinct mutating them into a baying mob with one purpose, the selfish crush for the exits that swept her aside. So few survivors and no way back for Emma’s vain guilt. The searing muscle memory of Emma’s hand ignites: rigid tendons: angry, purple parchment skin deeply throbs beneath the anomalous cotton glove. The dormant sickly fetor of cloying burned flesh awakes and invades her reality. Emma feverishly ill-prepared, confronts her fate. Frantic for her moment with destiny to arrive and

depart: for the temporary relief from the flashbacks. Before the relentless countdown begins again - the survivor's curse.

'Get back to work' they said, 'the best way to confront your fear' they said. Emma began to understand the shrinks hadn't a clue.

19.30: Emma could no longer ignore her fate; to confront her nemesis, the dormant ET002, reassuringly powerful and statistically safe avion, with 400 hundred souls plus crew already in its fuselage. With trembling muscles and stolen breath, Emma tentatively took the first steps alone – alone with her moment of truth - along the air bridge into the softly lit gloom: to a future full of dread: a future of perilous hope.

The Herald

Seasons dominated Reef's life and emotions. Born to the heartbeat of the land; from a wild child on a New Zealand hill station to a youth in the rough who hunted pig. Untameable. In trouble at every turn. His reputation preceded his every action and inevitably brought conflict with authority. One crisis building into another. A bleak future beckoned. He saw the dead-end reality all around him - reflected in his peers – no work: drugs: despair and ultimately self-destruction. Reef's world was a death trap It was smothering. It caged him.

That was until he flew his nest without warning to all but his secret keeper, Mary, an elderly matriarch of his extended family. She had a fearsome spirit. A tough breed of colonial woman with whom no one could argue. A wiry, half-pint spinster, she imposed her will on her extended family and to all who ever met her. Stand up arguments were not uncommon in the family but somehow never with Mary; her views prevailed. Her self-belief was undeniable. Reef the youth often cursed Mary under his breath, but he had never fallen out with her. Whether by her design or instinct, he shied away from the precipice of a final intransigence stand. He had never dared contemplate what might happen if she lost her cool. Formidable didn't cut it, even awesome fell somewhat short. It puzzled him how someone so small could be such a personal force to contend with. He had often wished he had half her self-confidence.

But Mary was his life's anchor. Mary always tolerated and protected Reef - against all his detractors - he never understood why? But his debt to her was more than that. Mary, was a surrogate to the young orphaned Reef; the only person he could relate to through his angry years. She never judged him but she never left him in doubt of where he stood and what she expected. Tough love? He didn't understand it at the time but knew enough, deep down she meant more to him than blood. The only one he could trust and hold on to without compromise or expectation of any emotional commitment.

It was during a low point in the boiling ferment of his self-destruction: a drinking binge: that she took him aside and left him in no doubt what his future held. "You stay here you'll be dead in the year. You leave, you'll give yourself a chance. Think about it and chose. If you want to live, let me know – I will help you."

He owed Mary his life.

Reef vanished with a fist full of money she had given him. His flight was desperate; chaotic, fraught with hazards - working hops through Asia – trouble seemed to follow him, until life broke the callow youth. It was a matter of adapt to survive. He washed up into Europe and eventually Canada. The northern, dark, short December days scrambled his southern instincts and left him longing for blue skies and the wild weather of his Kahurangi home. Despite his sentimentality his wanderings took him further away from home. He coped with the seasonal schisms the only way he knew how. Content only to stay a while, waiting for any excuse – or creating one - to move on again.

A decade passed. Life's bruising encounters burned away emotional indifference and rebellion. It hammered maturity into responsibility and strength. From roughhewn firebrand emerged a tall, physically intimidating, natural but unwilling leader: one who preferred to keep his counsel. Gold veined grey eyes that gave him his birth name Reef, betrayed little of

his thoughts except a quickening to anger, warning away intrusion and familiarity: his tolerance was not to be tested.

Then fate intervened and threw whatever future Reef had planned into disarray. One of his rare phone calls home at the approaching turn of a northern winter solstice, triggered a dash back from the other side of the world. Mary, 77 years of age, who still ran her coastal station on the edge of a National Park - had fallen seriously ill. To curious locals who had known of the teenage rebel the reason for his return was totally out of character. But to Reef it was the unbreakable bond between two of the most unlikely people. Mary needed him: full circle: Reef didn't hesitate to honour a debt. His old world tumbled back into sight. Familiar mountains, roads and rivers forced their way into his life. He prepared himself. Ugly encounters from the past littered the landscape, memorials to broken promises - bloody debts - grievances not forgotten - a price still to be paid. But Reef the journeyman breathed deep, spat his disdain and trod the history of his youth underfoot, denying the past control over his reincarnation.

But nothing he could have done would have prepared Reef for his first sight of Mary. He could not recall ever seeing Mary laid up in bed. Had she ever been ill? As he re-entered Mary's life and the weatherboard Victorian villa, it looked the same as the day he had walked out of her life. Panelled native Rimu walls dulled the natural light in her bedroom from the sash windows; a perpetual gloom lit by the single side lamp; the air lingered with lavender. Reef received a curt nod of welcome. Had he ever left? No questions? No inquisition? But her welcome was warmed slightly at the edge with a tiny smile of pleasure; perhaps pride in the boy man in front of her. It was if it was nothing less than she would have expected, nor he of her. He returned the favour and sought no explanation of her health.

"Mary." Reef nodded down to her as he stood by her bed. Her hair, more silver grey than he remembered - marked the passage of time since they last met - was almost indistinct against the starch white cotton sheets; in stark contrast to her dark weathered skin, strong sinewy fingers, ribbed with purple veins. She had always been old to him.

"Son." she replied firmly "Good to see you."

"Can I get you anything: tea?"

Mary shook her head. "I have all I need." The hint of the word 'now' lingering unspoken in the air between them.

Reef nodded. "I'll unpack and get started then."

And with that the legacy of his troubled youth and lost years were swept aside: never spoken of again. They started their new life together finding strength and comfort in each other. At the beginning Reef's return gave Mary new heart. The Mary of old found her sharp tongue and the strength to venture out onto the veranda of the old villa, to enjoy the respite, the air on her skin, the sun's comforting warmth on her face. For Reef a transformation also began. with his return to the land - his dishevelled hair bleached in the bright blue, clear sunlit days. It burned away the pale callow northern skin, for the familiar raw weather-beaten countenance of exposure to the elements - bruised puffy cheekbones, eyebrows and sockets, and what little fat he had rapidly vanished.

Reef ran the hill station the way he knew would please her. The family called on occasions but she would chase them away. It was her time with her boy. Gradually the summer fell into autumn, and with it he witnessed her exhausting daily fight to hold back the pain and deny her frailty. But her eyes stayed bright and her voice strong. She wanted to know everything and would talk long into the evenings of her plans for the land as if there was no question she would see them through, until Reef realized Mary was entrusting her dreams of the future to him.

But as the days turned into weeks and then months her world closed in around her again; she retreated once more to her bed; her deteriorating health undeniable. She shrank and despite the doctor's positive prognosis and assurances Reef grew more certain of the inevitable outcome of her condition. He couldn't deny the sickening hollow sensation in the pit of his stomach. The realisation threw him into a crisis, triggered unexpectedly by something he had seen a hundred times before.

A graven image that rent open the floodgates of his torrid emotions.

Reef had been riding up a deep tussock valley on his mare Eryn, looking out for his stock when he came upon the pitiful sight of a dead, newly born lamb. He dismounted and as he crouched down to gently pick up the cold, wet body; without warning the limp carcass and sightless cloudy eyes unleashed in him thoughts of the approaching, unbearable loss of Mary. The shocking anguish erupted in his breast. He gasped on a shuddering breath. Staggering upright, Reef stretched out his clenched fists towards the sky, throwing his head back, crying out such a roar of anger it hurt his being to its core. A plaintive cry of injustice carried on the winds. He shook with the ultimate humiliation of his isolation and loneliness. Collapsing to his knees, Reef's body heaved and shook uncontrollably and tears flowed like a river. The pent-up emotions of a lifetime found its primeval voice and spilled out - lanced the putrescent guilt - torment over the debt owed to Mary he could no longer repay. Time stopped. His future robbed from him. He couldn't see beyond the inevitable day - the loss of his rock. She had always been there. Wherever he had roamed Mary had been part of his unconscious world, an anchor but now she would be taken from his life and he was lost.

Eventually the crisis was spent. Bewildered and exhausted he struggled to his feet, leaning heavily on Eryn's reins and pommel, he wearily pulled himself up into her saddle. Eryn had stood protectively over Reef through his crisis, now instinctively she turned her head for home taking care of her charge.

Reef resolved not to allow his fears change anything but to make each day as normal for Mary as he could. Compassion was not an instinct for Reef but it flickered to life. It flared into a deep brand. The practical necessities of managing the land conflicted with his preoccupation and growing unease about Mary's bed-ridden condition. She could no longer care for herself in the most basic ways. Her body was failing and her increasing dependency thrust parenthood on him. It surprised him how he coped with the functional needs of her care, practical reality took priority but waves of overwhelming sadness intruded. He could not recall an occasion when she had needed to rely on anyone. He realized that the Mary of his childhood had gone; he had already lost her. In part she was now a stranger.

Reef returned home from a long day in the hills with a cruel southerly for company that made the tasks twice as long. The weather howled and scrambled to get into the house as he forced the door shut and clambered out of his wet gear. He entered Mary's room to check on her

before starting on the meal for them both. In the warm glow of the bedside lamp Reef could see her head turned toward the window, watching the rain lash itself wildly against the glass. One hand was resting on top of the covers. She vaguely waved him over to her side.

Reef sat on the edge of the bed and waited. When she finally turned her face to him, he saw what was coming. He hoped and prayed she didn't see the pain that struck him hard. The spark had gone. Her eyes were laden. God, how he wanted to hold her in his arms but instead he sat and smiled at her.

"Rough day?" she whispered.

Reef nodded. "You?"

Mary shrugged; the effort of speaking drained her energy. She reached hesitantly for a glass of water. Reef took it from her shaking hand and eased it to her lips to sip. He felt numb, unsure what to say or do. Words meant nothing. She was fading before his eyes. He found it hard to believe the difference from the morning. Mary looked briefly back at the window. The wind and rain battered and blustered at the glass for her attention.

Eventually in a dry cracked voice. "Winter will soon be here. The season's change. An end and a beginning."

Mary sounded weary; accepting finally she had lost the fight. "You will stay on." She looked back to Reef.

It wasn't a demand or a question, just a confirmation of what she already knew. He nodded in reply. They both understood what was happening - no false words of denial or protestation. Reef let her keep control, after all that was how she lived her life. Then from under her bedclothes she drew out a crumpled old brown package and pushed it towards him.

"I have something: one last request: I have asked little of you son."

Mary struggled to keep her composure: to find breath to speak. He waited for the spasm to subside. Her wasted fingers tapped the packaging for his attention, a deathly insistent knocking. It sent a shudder through Reef. It was if nothing else mattered. He glanced at the package.

"Please promise me you will read these. I need to know. You must read these."

Reef, puzzled was about to speak when she cut across him, shaking her head.

"No time to explain. I am not losing my mind." Her insistent tone he knew well but the effort was weakening her. "I must have your promise?"

"Yes. I will read them. But I don't under..." Again, she waved away his question the effort rapidly tiring her.

"Just listen."

Mary's voice was barely audible - a panting rasp.

“I need you to promise: You will take care of her: She is precious: A secret I have kept: As others have done - before me - now it’s your turn.”

Mary became distracted her eyes drifting into the distance, talking to herself

“I should have told you sooner but didn’t know how - left it too long.”

She struggled to breathe again, exhausted, driven by the urgency of time running out. In those following seconds thoughts tumbled around Reef’s mind. He felt powerless to help her, not sure what his Mary wanted of him. Why this now? Had he missed something. Mary wasn’t making any sense. Was she getting her memories mixed up? What was in the package? Who was she talking about? He couldn’t think of any ‘she’ - what secret? He couldn’t ask. And did it really matter that much?

Mary recovered her composure one more time. “I have been worrying all day, hoping you would get home in time.” As if reading Reef’s mind. “Can’t explain, it’s complicated; it’s all in the books.”

Mary’s rambling voice tailed off. Her hand reached out to Reef - an iron grip – an unwavering gaze, waiting for his agreement. It was a death promise to be held in trust. Reef didn’t doubt the importance to Mary. A need to bind him to a future he couldn’t see. He knew he had no choice. Reef didn’t understand, but he trusted Mary and would always trust her to know what was right. At that moment he would have agreed to anything. All that mattered to him was that he was losing her. He was distraught.

“Yes,” he whispered in return. “If it’s that important to you.”

She sighed so deeply, Reef thought for an awful moment it had been her last breath but then she smiled and the last few months fell away. He sensed Mary’s peace of mind. His tears ran silent, unabated, he couldn’t have stopped them if he had wanted to.

“Look for the herald – Paradisaea - that’s when she will come.”

Mary’s words were barely audible - a nonsense - her mind drifting away? Her eyes slowly closed watching him to the last with such intensity that he would never forget. Reef sat with Mary into the night, as she slipped from their world and his life. He had no idea when the end came. It was the grey of dawn, the mournful alarm call of a Spur Wing Plover that roused him from his frozen stupor to the icy cold fastness of her grip. He didn’t know where the hours had gone but he knew where he had been in his waking dreams.; with Mary, walking through their lives together. He hoped she had been with him.

The days after Mary’s death passed in a fug as did the several weeks of officialdom that followed – the administrative ‘termination of a life’ - Reef didn’t want any part of it. The extended family seemed to understand. They took care of it all while he took care of the land and the stock. The routine and demands of running the station helped insulate Reef from the raw memories. Finally, the days lengthened again and the season of death passed away. He was glad to see the back of it to feel once more the heartbeat of life returning and with it the urge to close the chapter on the traumatic episode. It was then he rediscovered Mary’s package. Reef took it outside and sat in the November sun, on an old chopping log, sheltered from the wind by the woodshed. He stared at the wrinkled brown paper packaging for ages,

remembering her words but still not making any more sense of them. He knew he would have to face reopening painful memories to understand his promise to Mary. Reef unfolded the wrapping. Three tattered notebooks emerged. Heavily used but not abused. He flicked through them quickly. All three were full of diary notes. Two in neat unfamiliar handwriting. His eyes scanned over the pages without taking in the content; his heart wasn't really in it. Finally giving up when he recognized Mary's spidery writing in the third one that looked the most recent. Reef wasn't ready. He carefully packed them away again. There was plenty of time he reasoned. But he was wrong.

Reef woke to a beautiful morning and prepared Eryn and packed his saddle horse for a week away. He could have used the farm quad or 'ute' but he naturally shied away from vehicles on the station when he could, they were intrusive; a noise invasion of the modern farming world that corrupted the feel of the land. His mood lifted. A chance to get away from the memories that waited for him every night at the villa. It was time to check the hill pastures and fences after the winter storms - a good two-day trek from the homestead. Mary had an old cabin tucked into the hill bush and rock outcrops, with stunning views towards the coast where her land swept down into the bay. For the first time in what felt like a lifetime, he smiled with childish pleasure at the thought of smelling the salt marshes and of seeing the riotous local and migrant seabirds that fed on the ebb tide twice a day; where they argued noisily over the disappearing muddy margins as the incoming tide squeezed them up against the encroaching shoreline.

Eryn's sure-footed gait, her nodding head and the rocking motion made his journey effortless, taking him along winding valleys, clothed in ancient bush. He made his camp in familiar sheltered spots falling asleep to heavy breathing of his two mares.

Reef arrived late afternoon. Mary's cabin was ancient, dilapidated, made up of an odd assortment of wooden off-cuts and tidal debris that over the years washed up and found new life in the bleached skeletal structure. Somehow the ramshackle cabin survived - folded into the bush, slowly sinking into the land with every passing season. Bellbirds and plovers were his only immediate company, acting as his alarm, waking him up with the sun - if the flimsy threadbare curtains failed to let enough light in to do the job. Later in the summer millions of cicadas would drown out all other sound with their thrum of relentless energy. Mary's cabin existed the heart of it all.

The cabin was so remote, that it was literally off the map. Only a few locals knew of its existence. Its isolation suited Reef's mood perfectly. He settled Eryn and the packhorse in the nearby shed and set the fire for the evening to drive out the remnants of the late winter damp - the retreating winter would still hold its night time grip on this land for a few more weeks. As he contentedly clattered around preparing food, there was a knock. It was so quiet at first Reef thought he had imagined it. But then he heard it again: hesitant: uncertain in its vigour but definitely a knock. Reef opened the door without thought or expectation. The suddenness of his action nearly scared the wits out of the young woman who stood on the threshold. He wasn't sure who was more taken aback. He hadn't really expected to find anyone there, and neither did it appear by her reaction, had the woman expected to see Reef? They both apologized instantly talking over each other followed by a long foolish silence.

"Sorry," she started again in a firm, confident voice. "When I saw the smoke - I thought Mary would be here." She looked past Reef.

"Mary? You knew Mary?"

“Well, not exactly.” She paused thrown by the implications of Reef’s use of the past tense, then hesitantly. “My mother... knew Mary: They were old friends.”

What was he doing? Reef shook his head appreciating the absurdity of holding an inquisition with a young, diminutive woman in a remote doorway - a long way from anywhere.

“We better start over again. Sorry. Come in please, you can’t stand out there.” He walked away from the door back into the cabin, leaving the choice to her. He filled a saucepan with water.

“Would you like a brew, or something else? I am not long in myself.”

“Are you Reef?”

He stopped what he was doing and turned to find her in the middle of the room, watching him. Reef nodded. There was a lot here he didn’t understand. He realised that he could not brush this odd situation aside, to circumvent human contact – instinctively avoiding any commitments - as was his nature. He finally resigned himself to an evening different to the one he had planned and vainly hoped the situation would soon resolve itself.

“This is odd, isn’t it? Better settle yourself down. It sounds as though we need to talk.”

She didn’t say she wanted a drink but when he presented her with a mug of steaming tea she lay down her sun faded brown back pack and clasped the warmth of the drink between her hands. She blew gently on the steam - in the growing chill of the approaching night air. Reef noted her clothes, an odd mix of colours and materials, chosen for practical comfort not fashion; for tramping in all weathers.

Forced out of his usual reticence, he clumsily started off with what he thought would be a light-hearted opening to break the ice, but as soon as he spoke it sounded painfully contrived.

“As they say you have me at a disadvantage. You seem to know about me, about Mary but I know nothing about you.”

The girl frowned. She cast down her eyes, disconcerted by Reef’s words.

Reef encouragingly, tried again. “A name would help?”

She responded instinctively and looked up to see how he would react. “Oh! I’m Dawn. My mother was Summer.”

Reef smiled not sure what to say as various impressions ran through his mind, instead he replied, “You say your mother knew Mary?”

He had the feeling he wasn’t getting something right. Dawn sat down into the old threadbare armchair quietly taking stock of her situation.

“My mother died a few months ago. She had known Mary all her life.”

Reef was at a loss, events conspiring to overtake him. Mary had never ever mentioned a woman named Summer to him. He had to come to terms with the hard truth that he had been away a long time. He could not deceive himself that he truly knew Mary or could claim a closeness based on a shared life, he had sacrificed all that when he fled. Reef felt a depth of sadness flood over him, a deep sense of an intense loneliness; confronted by a young woman who knew more of him and Mary - it was that simple.

“I’m sorry Dawn. Sorry to hear about your mother. It seems we’ve both lost...” he hesitated trying to avoid saying the wrong thing again. “Worse for you. Your mother.” He mumbled wishing he could escape from the situation he now found himself in. “It’s hard to cope with losing someone close: Words aren’t enough? Can’t be enough.”

More puzzled than ever he sensed Dawn relax as he spoke. He found her unnerving, complex, impossible to read. They were both genuinely concerned for the other’s loss but he was no nearer understanding why as two strangers they were sat in a room in the backcountry, making polite talk. Reef’s head ached. He really couldn’t make any sense of his bizarre situation so in desperation he suggested it was too late for her to go anywhere; that she was welcome to stay for a meal; for the night. As he made the invitation he groaned inwardly, hating his inability to say what he meant, how the proposal sounded. He wasn’t any good at one-to-one conversations, especially with a young woman. He had cultivated an air of reproach, distant, slightly threatening – to avoid any situation that exposed him to personal scrutiny.

But Dawn laughed disarmingly as his fumbled words tried to retract any unintended implications. “Don’t worry I feel I have grown up with you. My mum told me a lot about Mary’s rebel boy.”

Her familiarity, in what was his domain, had him beat. He was tired and in danger of becoming unreasonably irritable. He took a deep breath. He would get a grip on the situation in the morning. But the morning led to more of the same and the pattern repeated itself for the next few days. Dawn showed no hurry to leave or explain how or why she had turned up at Mary’s cabin when she did.

All he could confirm was that Mary and Summer had regularly stayed together at the cabin over the years. In the absence of anything more substantial Reef speculated to himself about Dawn. But even that was not straightforward. First impressions could deceive as he soon realized. Each subsequent impression ran contrary to the previous view he had formed. Dawn’s accent seemed to modulate and offered no hint of where she was from. He discovered she could speak several languages. Her amber eyes gave all but the appearance of a wild animal, which Reef found distracting, especially when he caught her studying him. It was something he was used doing to others; to be on the receiving end was an unnerving experience. Shoulder length black hair framed her Eurasian features, unadorned by makeup. Dawn’s skin suggested an exotic bloodline. All her worldly possessions lived in the backpack that was never far from her side; her movements lithe, strong and confident.

Although Reef got to know very little about Dawn, she got him to open up despite the protective layers he had built up over the years. He couldn’t help himself and although every night as he fell to sleep he resolved to turn the situation around the next day, he failed abysmally. She would deftly turn the questions aside and he found himself talking again. Despite himself he became fascinated by Dawn. He enjoyed her company as he worked. Reef

appreciated having someone so easy to share his world. It was a time of healing for both of them.

Then one morning he rose to find Dawn outside, staring up into the sky the backpack on her shoulder. As Reef reached her, she turned. "You're going?" The words brought on a sudden hollow sense of loss; he realized how he would miss her.

She smiled sadly. "Yes: You know how it is Reef."

"Should I? I suppose - Yes." As he recalled his nomadic behaviour of the past. "But." He desperately searched for some words "You'll be back?"

She took a while to answer. "Why would that be?" She seemed to test Reef as she had in that first evening, but he misunderstood her meaning.

"I... Err." Reef ended lamely.

She shook her head, resigned as if he was a lost cause. Turning her attention back to the crazy, noisy crush of seabirds in the distance, wading about in the shallows and mud of the foreshore.

"Paradisaea." She almost sighed the words. "They are moving on and I have to go now. I'm sorry."

The word gradually found resonance in Reef's memory. It took him a few moments to recall.

"What?" Reef exclaimed with shock as the images of Mary on her dying bed confronted him. An echo. A promise made. The word finally materialized. "What? Paradisaea? Why did you say that? What is it?"

Dawn's mood changed in an instant, she snapped her head around. "Why?"

"God, you can infuriate, always answer a question with a question." But then relented sensing that it was the moment Dawn had been waiting for. "Mary," he gabbled, dragging her words out of the past. "Mary made me promise. Something about a herald - Paradisaea - she gave me notebooks. I promised her, but she was dying, not making any sense - rambling. What is Paradisaea? How did you know about it?"

Dawn's face came alive, her eyes sparked with excitement. There was heartfelt relief in her voice. She pointed to the deepening blue sky and silver flashing distant wings,

"Paradisaea is their Latin name. The terns fly from the Arctic to Antarctic." She stepped up to Reef and touched his arm. "Read the diaries Reef. Remember your promise to Mary - it's a promise to me. Watch for the herald of Spring: - Paradisaea." Her laughter was light and seemed to echo around him. "I am your secret Reef, and I will be back."

And with that Dawn turned on her heels and ran like the wind. South was her heading. And as she arrived, she vanished from his world.

Reef devoured the notebooks. Dumbfounded at first but gradually he fitted it all together. They were diary entries for the last 130 years; from a succession of his family members, who

lived on this station before Mary. They told the story of Dawn's heritage, of her mother Summer and her forebears. The history of a migratory people who follow the seasons. A wilderness race of people that officially can't exist - don't exist - as no record could bear witness to their existence. Her people were solitary or small family groups migrating across great distances following the changing seasons – as Dawn followed the *Sterna Paradisaea*: the Arctic Tern: the herald of Spring - along ancient, unmarked trails across continents and oceans. Travelling north to south across borders that didn't exist to them. A race at home in many tongues. Dawn's family ancestral migration route took her through Indo-Asia, over the water to Australia and then across the Tasman into New Zealand. They touched the lives of other peoples – found brief sanctuary with their secret keepers - over the ages and seasons. Familiar for a passing moment. A solitary existence and sometimes dying unremarked. A race of wild spirits invisible in Reef's world.

He asked himself the question why? But knew there was no answer. Why does the Arctic Tern cross the oceans and continents, only to turn around and fly back, year on year? Dawn's way of life was at one with the beat of the seasons. She followed the same ancient instincts of nature as her mother and others before her, free of conventions, of domestic possessions. A human species of an old world.

Reef felt a tug of envy; the young wanderer in his heart. But to his surprise he found it was enough to share her world, to offer Dawn sanctuary. He had promised Mary and would honour her memory and as others have done before him and still did along Dawn's migratory route. It was something he could understand, believe in, protect. Something precious. Something new that would mark the tread of the seasons.

His secret to keep.

Raven's Conspiracy

The frozen, midwinter night sky was alive with sparkling starlight but the magical sight was lost on Gallus and Ariette - his wife - in their desperate flight from the marauding North-men. Deathly screams and sickening thuds of iron cleaving flesh and bone harried their desperate flight towards Northey as they crossed the slimy, hoar iced wooden bridge leading to the higher ground. The fire beacons had raised the alarm but too late as the vikingr were born to raid creeks and inlets of the Fenn Blackwater.

Mike pulled his old Ford fiesta into the passing bay by the old stone bridge: killed the engine and removed his metal detector from the boot.

“Do we have to do this now Dad?” Complained Dana, Mike’s teenage daughter. “Mum wants us home in time for Corro - with the fish and chips.”

“It won’t take long. The farmer’s just finished ploughing. I need to get in before any ‘nighthawks.’ I won’t let those bastard night raiders get the jump on one of my sites again.”

Across the Nene, Gallus could see the ghostly figure of the vikingr roaring, as their savagery swept through the burning Worth: the timber palisade was no defence against their violent assault. He caught Ariette as she stumbled. Gallus put his supportive hand around her waist and felt the sodden fur of her mortal wound.

But before he could speak, she groaned and almost fainted. “I am so sorry Gallus,” she gasped.

Gallus heart broke. “Not far – we shelter under the Ravens’ yews.”

Mike wasn’t to be denied, he stormed up the hill.

“Why here Dad?”

“Ravens. Ravens,” he replied as if it was obvious.

“What about Ravens?”

“They love shiny things: Valuable shiny things. This was a big Raven’s roost in the dark ages – it’s their hoard site. I researched it. Good idea, eh?”

“You sure Dad? Isn’t it Jackdaws that nick things? I saw it on the TV.”

Mike hesitated. He daughter’s words had an echo of truth but he didn’t want to listen, he mumbled. “Same type of bird.”

Ariette and Gallus collapsed under the deep black shadow of a big yew and leaned against a large boulder. Ariette was fading fast: Gallus tears ran unabated, carving scars through his grim smoke-stained countenance. He accepted the inevitable but would not leave his childhood love. One last act before he would join with her. Gallus drew his knife and stabbed the ground to bury their jewels and rings together – to outwit the ‘Warags’. His fingers then tore at the yew foliage from a branch. Chewing on the leaves and seeds he drew Ariette close

to him – a final gentle kiss – they lay back spellbound by the beautiful heavens where they would journey together.

Two hours passed with Dana nagging her father about time – her phone pinging texts from mum demanding to know where they were – Mike collapsed in a sweaty heap onto a large boulder. He couldn't understand it, grumbling to himself. "Bloody nothing." Mike thumped his detector on the ground in frustration: It squealed in protest?

The Lady and Her Poet

Author's note:

· I have been collecting material for a medieval fantasy novel for more years than I care to remember which included a guidebook as reference material for Warwick Castle. The Castle has a wonderful history and is an inspiring place for ideas – it's also rich with intrigue, treachery and ghosts.

· I have tried to start my fantasy novel many times. It's a story of epic proportions that I wrote in a style that I hope allows the reader to believe in the 'fictional dream'.

· The Lady and the Poet short story gave me the chance to write a test piece to explore the language, its rhythm and the terminology, important in immersing the reader in the period. There are risks in this approach – boring the pants off the reader... for one. I will soon find out whether you made it to the end!

Black days in the year of God's grace, 1627. A melancholy despair clutched cold Sir Faulke Greville's heart and mortified his soul. Greville stepped back from the parapet, a sharp blast of raw air sprang upon him, heralding doom-laden clouds of sleet that marched abroad. His deep woollen cloak clasped high around his neck, breeches, fur lined leather hood and boots offered scant protection; the years lay too heavy on his gaunt, austere features. A chill was more a danger to him than a sword thrust. The irony was not lost on him; he was hardly worth the human effort of a deadly stroke, when a spear of icy wind was all that was needed.

He peered out into the gathering eventide gloom from the crenellate embrasure of the Watergate Tower, his most frequented crow's nest within Warwick castle. It provided Greville with a majestic view of the watery, winter sun escaping the forsaken land, taking with it the pitiful warmth mustered over the day. He observed the anxious, forlorn figures toiling in the distant fields, desperately harvesting what poor succour the land had left to offer. He shared the peasant's dread of mid-winter snows and the famine that would inevitably beckon. A foraging pigeon appeared in the fading, argentine sky. It glided with a grace towards the scattered, holly roosts that stood stark as vert gravestones in the leafless, chase under-wood of elm and beech. Their finely etched leafless heads standing erect and sublime above the deepening shadows.

Greville's gaze was drawn to the ageless, brown whirlpool meanderings of the River Avon that swept in a majestic dance around the flanks of his Warwick fast hold. The poet within him disappointed at finding little to inspire: to set flight to his fancy: to free him of all mortal strictures: to kindle aflame wistful imaginings in all he surveyed. But it should have come as no surprise. Grave matters of state overwhelmed him. They laid his spirit low, felled by a foreboding of portents - ravens of civil war beckoned - threatening to engulf his England. A cold flush of sweat broke over Greville's skin as he strove to calm the dread that assailed him. His knotted guts robbed him of any craving for food; he could barely recall when he last broke his fast. It exhausted him, drained of will and strength. Was it not enough for a mortal man to bear witness to the King and the Parliamentarians at each other's throats - bellicose dogs deserving of each other - contriving plots, baying for each other's blood. Soon they would escape their leash to tear his beloved Albion asunder.

The affairs of state alone should have sufficed for his despondency but he was further troubled by a female visitation that haunted his pitiable, sleepless nights. This bane had stalked his sanity for two full moons. What of the woman's spirit, why did she torment him so? Had he not enough worries to wear his wits bare? Mayhap it was his own conceit to believe he was the dreamer of dreams: a minstrel of prose. Perhaps such self-indulgence, such wanderings into the depths and corners of his mind had unwittingly laid him open to this siren and her song. Where would it all end? The poet turned aside, resigned to another long vigil entering the stone portal of the poorly lit Tower. Into the dark decent; spiralling abyss of worn steps; an echo of the legions that had gone before him. The smoking, tallow lamps burned poorly in the tricky winds. Dancing shadows sought to confuse. He hesitated - not for fear of a false step - for he knew every nook and cranny of his Warwick but because a sense of foreboding assailed him. Greville tilted his head, as a hunting dog with an uncertain scent. In the far distance a growling rumble rolled across the low-land. At once he perceived the change in the air, lost to him before now in his distracted condition, it was heavy and threatening; uncomfortably breathless and watchful; laden with more than...

Greville rebuked himself. 'But no more of this.' He shook his head to release his fanciful notions and allowed himself a weary smile, madness lurked uncomfortably close by this night. He would have to watch his step in more ways than one.

The chill, dank, well of shadows below his feet, splashed with brittle white lightning through an arrow loop; a flickering image of solid hewn stone. Greville traced the dressed surface with a finger, appreciative of the masons' bladed work: a headstone to his skill. The ancient castle's bones had witnessed many a fool and too few wise men. Most had abused her. He alone had restored her pride. But at what cost? His heart had deceived his eye. The poet fooled himself into anguish and pain. The daylight of reality served notice on Greville who had to his cost, cajoled, bribed and threatened his engineers, to fulfil his heart's vision and bidding. But that was in the past. Now his Lady Warwick and he were as one - wrought out of a common cause. Bitter anger welled up again at his impotency from protect her for an uncertain future; of overwhelming thoughts of Warwick once more reduced to smouldering ruins; Warwick broken and razed to rubble by civil war; his Lady scavenged over by booty soldiers and camp followers. Greville's frustrated anger at the threat that lay before them both flowed from the stupidity and disgrace of Buckingham's ill-fated and ill-conceived expedition to La Rochelle to aid the Huguenots. Predictable failure that would now turn England upon herself: The King and Parliament would set about each other. It was only a question of when.

Greville cried out his grief into the void. He set off in a perilous haste; plunging down into the castle's labyrinth, seeking the courtyard and beyond to his refuge, Ethelfleda's Mound: the heart of his Warwick. The Mound had been his final act of restoration; a crowning glory to honour Ethelfleda, daughter of Great King Alfred: Lady of the Mercians; founder of Warwick, in defence of England and in defiance of the invading hordes of Danes, who betrayed her trust.

Stumbling out of the Tower's shadows he wobbled as a drunk up the twisting path of the Mound, heaving lungs of early hoar frost laden air with the crazed exertion of a maddened bull. Greville faltered to a bewildered stop. He awoke as a man from delirium, puzzled by his circumstance. A heavy fragrant bouquet of a briar rose lay gently about him, so soothing that it seemed pointless to go further. His legs could no longer carry him, he slumped down, prostrate on the dank grass. For an age he remained so, until, finally his trembling heart and

limbs found strength. He rolled over, transfixed by a crackling flash of lightning that cruelly etched the Watergate Tower against the tempest night. It shocked him back a lifetime: memories: the ghostly appearance of a crumbling ruin emerging out of a November river fog: a cold, hoary, unwelcoming day: cursing the poor decision - or perhaps it was fate - that forced him out onto the road in such God forsaken weather. The castle Warwick was then in large part, abandoned and degenerate. She served no more useful purpose than that of a county goal; a pitiless, graven effigy. The occasion was also memorable for it marked the official gazette of his demise from public office - driven out by the devious hand of Lord Salisbury - who contrived Greville's retirement from his notable duties as Treasurer to the Navy. On an impulse Greville still did not understand, he demanded the castle Warwick as the price for his silence, for his fall from grace. History and the scribes would now stand in judgement on him, not that he cared for either opinion.

Greville cautiously sat up and clasped his head in his hands. He could no longer avoid his fate; the relentless confluence of time - midnight and with it the fateful hour of the winter solstice. She would come to him soon, this lost spirit. She would call again from out of the air. Such lonely desolation he had never heard before, from man or beast. The chilling emptiness of death; funereal, echoing revelations was how it all started. It was as if this poor wretched and tormented spirit had forever been searching, blind in the lonely darkness, seeking deliverance. In the beginning he denied her, in terror of what it might bring. Oh, but such foolishness, such disregard for his own soul, he eventually succumbed and became attentive. Her lament; her anguish had been his downfall; the notion haunted him that in some small part he could assuage an earlier mortal injustice. Her despair changed to hope, that somewhere a saviour was at hand. It was then that he understood his plight. He could no longer turn aside and abandon her to the cold emptiness. But of late there had occurred a new manifestation; she had found him. Her quest had finally brought her to an ethereal doorway between them; she knew he waited beyond in hesitant attendance. Her siren song now spoke of enduring love for her saviour poet. He was her chivalrous knight.

While all this came to pass, he had not remained idle. She tied his salvation to her release from earthly purgatory and for that resolution he must come to know her true name and the fate that befell her. But his quest, his studies of old records was without reward and now it was all too late. It resigned him to the contrivance of their fates. It would rob him of all he held precious. Greville's sigh was deep and profound. Without protest or shame, tears ran freely down his cheeks. Alone he sat without pretension or pride. Alone but for his Warwick and for her alone he wept. Wept out all the pent-up emotions of a long hard life, of hopelessness and confusion and finally for his solitary habit. He had never married there had never been time. He sobbed out loud. How he wished his Warwick could understand him and what she meant to a lonely old poet - she was all he had left. Greville froze, his self-pity forgotten. In the momentary calm, he heard her siren's cry. In answer the winter storm broke overhead, unleashing malevolence. He rose unsteadily to his feet, bewildered and apprehensive. At first the howl and a roar of the warring elements deafened him but gradually he grew more certain of the soft, alluring rapture. She had come for him, his nemesis and with her, a revelation, the spectre of death no longer dismayed him. Mayhap, after his long life with no one to mourn or be mourned by, it was not to be so unexpected. He set his course, any doubt cast aside; he would seek her out and accept what the fates ordained.

The old poet staggered to his feet, ravaged by the tumult of winds, hungrily clawing and punching his body. Bemused, he vaguely perceived the fragrance of the briar that remained undisturbed and strong about him, in defiance of the wild forces. But he did not question why and in that heart-beat he was lost, to walk forever. Blundering forward he fell heavily, lying in sodden and puddled verdure. His heart raced, his limbs shook. In desperation he gasped out his anger at his failing strength. Her siren strain grew louder, the storm in retort, unassailable. He battled to his feet once more. And struggled up the Mound clawing at mud. She knew he was coming but at that moment her refrain was no longer where he expected: it was around him: high on the wind: then at his back.

Midnight struck. He turned in trepidation; agitated and elated as the truth finally dawned; supernal upon the Mound was the apparition of a woman, untouched by the tempest. A peaceful, grey, swirling incandescence that he instantly knew to be the embodiment of his Lady Warwick: her briar scent imbued his heart with longing. Her raised arms beckoned her poet. Greville toiled forward and up; each step met by a greater more determined resistance; cruel, unyielding forces fell upon his frail body. All that was natural set against the union. He gasped and was felled by a final grievous, dammed stroke; bolts of hail smote him a torrent of mortal, laying blows - denying the poet his one desire - condemning his life and soul for eternity. Whether in a dream or truth it mattered little now, the enchantment lasted but a whisper in time. His Lady had gone. Such loneliness and consummate longing tore his whole being apart. Barely conscious, he lay before nature's wrath without care or desire to move; unslaked tears indiscernible on his drenched countenance. In bereaved repose; fingers lovingly caressing the greensward of the Mound, he swore a silent vow never to leave his Lady, perchance she would walk again; whereupon he would seek to right the wrong done to him – in union the Lady with her poet.

'Black days: in the year of God's grace, 1628, A melancholy despair clutched cold Sir Faulke Greville's heart and mortified his soul.....'

Three Days

She had flown into London three days before. But London was an adventure she could have ignored. A stop-over born out of curiosity piqued many times before on the long journey south. Her annual migration. Now in the twilight of her life she hesitantly welcomed the distraction and convenient diversion. She needed to rest, so finally gave into inquisitiveness, to explore the red glow dawn she had spied over the years. A red glow in the far night sky that never rose but seemed to glow more brightly with the passing of the decades.

The decision to change her habitual sojourn to warmer climes, to avoid the winter cold, was fraught with conflicting emotions. For several years she had been tempted to divert from her familiar trek but at the last moment her confidence had failed. It irritated that she could be so weak. She could be resolute and strong doing what she knew best but venturing off into unfamiliar territory required a courage that she wasn't sure she possessed. Age also brought with it, vulnerability. Loneliness was now a constant companion: family a distant fading memory: she alone survived. Life had been cruel. Each passing season longer and harder to endure. But this autumn she felt a change, instinctively she understood her time was running out and the 'itch' won her over.

The stark reality of the first morning in the City's heart had been a shock to body and soul. The baffling activity, the roaring noise and towering structures appeared to grow out of the sunrise, altering the landscape as she watched. It was almost too much to comprehend. It was confusing. It was alien to one whose solitary life was simple. A rural existence governed by the passage of time. In her world the years were measured only by a desire to see just one more bright face of the moon - set in a fire fly night sky - or a roaring sun rise.

Her mind was in turmoil. The instinct for flight had the opposite effect, bewildered and paralysed, she hid from view, cowering, shivering with shock. Oppressed by the bedlam and the fearful activity that erupted after dawn, the vastness of London swamped her, the sensations were overwhelming. She recognized it had been a mistake to come. Three days in London smothered her spirit; choking black clouds of depression suffocated her vigour for life. Each passing moment was an eternity. She was not sure how long she could endure.

By the third day she had recovered from the trauma as a deeper instinct struggled to find a meaning that would make her feel less isolated in the chaos; that in all the hostility a familiar scene would speak to her. In desperation and under the cover of darkness she took refuge at the top of a tall building in the City, overlooking the river. Discovering water had been small salvation, a link to a world she understood and from which she could draw strength.

But the City night had not afforded her any time to sleep, disturbed by the endless murmuring activity and false dawn of dazzling lights that prevailed deep into the early hours. So, at sunrise of the fourth day, she sat on the edge of the monolith in splendid solitude. It was her most precious part of the day, reminding her of home; clear, cool refreshing air; the sun, sweeping across the rolling hills, clearing away the fog. It cruelly threw the two worlds into sharp contrast, almost too painful to bear. But the interlude was transitory: it vanished in the flicker of the eye.

The desire to chase the wind was almost irresistible; to recapture the ephemeral birth of a new beginning, of hope. She gently closed her large brown eyes. Meadows beckoned: draped in mist, tall grasses bowed with morning dew: honeysuckle, its sweet fragrance thrummed with swarming life. But she could not hold the dream. Now was the awakening, as light crept relentlessly in from the east, freeing London's dun colour from the shadows, the monster beneath her feet stirred to life once more. She could feel the rumblings of its hungry stomach; the roaring arteries pumped with life, it's laboured breathing growing louder by the moment. She watched the dust sweep up into the air and recoiled from the revitalized stench that rapidly clogged her senses.

Silently, she cried out, this world was dying. She looked east and felt the sun warm her body, fluttering life back into her chilled flesh. She had to escape, leave this land as others had abandoned it before her. Stupor made her weak; she had not fed, nor slept well. She looked over the precipitous edge; it drew her eye down into the narrow, unforgiving canyon between the sky-scarpers, pulling her forward, a tempting release. Freedom required little effort. She was so tired. She had no place here. In weary submission she slipped forward off the precipitous edge fleeing from the torment. The air ripped and tore at her body; a rush burst upon her heart and a scream tore out deep from within her soul; a screech of defiance that found voice. It echoed between the glass and mirrored office blocks, refracting her plummeting body. She was leaving this corrupt land.

Heads turned upwards and arms pointed but not in horror, in open pleasure. She fell down upon the frozen multitude. She stretched her stiff muscles; opened her chest and felt the exhilarating power of her domain; broad wings feathered the wind, her talons flexed, then she swept down low over London Bridge. Over the hordes of commuters who had been struggling to work, deep in thought burdened down by their earthly worries. They felt her thrill, transfixed in awe, they envied her freedom. Scything across the sky, oblivious to the collective sigh that followed her effortless grace, she swept westward following the river wind. Eyes hungrily followed her fading silhouette in the forlorn hope she would return, affirming their connection to a lost world, rediscovering a rooted purpose to their collective, neutron existence. But as quickly she gave flight to their fantasies: disturbing the artificial order of the rush hour, the peeling bells of the City intruded and remarked time. Disillusioned, the skyward smiles fell back to earth and their metronome march began again.

The White Talon

“I am too old” groaned the creaking, aged heartwood of the majestic Kauri tree. “My limbs are weary. My back is tired. My skin is wretched with burrowing pests that sap my strength. I have seen too many seasons”, moaned his bough and branch in the unseasonable chill wind. The ghost owl listened to the familiar tales, she had heard so often before in the old hollow rotting burrows.

She was Aeom, the matriarch. She had little sympathy for the Kauri as he complained and grumbled to her endlessly, day and night since she had arrived late in the autumn on a warm nor-wester. He only fell silent when the wind slept and the forest was at peace. A score of generations before must have heard the same sad song. Aeom wondered how much longer the ancient Kauri could survive.

However, the ghost owl was preoccupied with more immediate and conflicting unease. A desperation borne of loneliness, unable to find any of her kind for many seasons no matter where she hunted or sailed on the wind. Her proud lineage passed back into time out of memory. The burden of expectation was hard to bear. Possibly, the last of her bloodline. But that was not all to burden Aeom. She feared for her survival. Driven to flee her homeland from the West to an unknown destiny. In search of sanctuary from a malignancy, its eye firmly fixed on her but she did not know why? Aeom left all that she had ever known climbing high into the heavens seeking the river winds that voyage across vast lands. They lifted her gently into their embrace and swept her out over the sea. In the depth of night, the stars that guided her path were abruptly buried in clouds. An ominous portent. A rampaging clash between the weather spirits. The great currents broke apart and cast Aeom down into an unfamiliar and threatening world. A wild treeless world. It rolled and crashed below her, white foaming claws grasping at her pitiful, battered body. There was no sanctuary only death. Burning muscles: gasping beak: red eye: in desperation she chased the updrafts. Aeom shivered violently to free her water laden feathers that threatened to drag her back into the maelstrom. When, with a failing will, without warning a spiraling column of wind roared out of the gloom, escaping the foaming torment. In desperate hope Aeom spread her wings and let fate decide where it would end? The brutal whirlwind drove higher, her pitiful form a flashing white pirouette against the dark pewter heavens. The uplift died as quickly as it started. Once more she was at one with the river wind, a grateful, weary Aeom skimmed the currents in a silent realm far above the storm below. In her element. A grey dawn crept across the sky. Towering peaks appeared, piercing the turbid carpet of clouds beneath her. She briefly closed her eyes overwhelmed with relief. A familiar sight. Aeom dropped into a shallow, halo glide, around the rock and snow-fields, descending into a new land, verdant rain forest on the west coast of New Zealand.

The burrow of the Kauri had been a temporary sanctuary for a cycle of the moon. Aeom eased her aching bones, tilted her head and ruffled her plumage, sinking lower for comfort. The leaden sky was growing lighter, but it was late and ominous. Heavy gathering storm clouds were building from the West threatening a desolate day. There was to be no hunting or peace. Only the promise of unremitting wind spears of rain. From the gossamer web to the great Kauri, none would be safe. Fur and feather would watch, fearful of the thundering voice, hoping the sky spirit’s wrath would quickly pass. That they would escape the cruel searing talons. Aeom retreated deeper into the burrow, as the biting air crept closer, spying out the land. The approaching growling anger drained her of all will. In the distance she could hear the first harbingers; the mischievous whisperings of the wind sprites. Sharp, evil,

conspiratorial tongues, hissed, rustling under leaves, whipping the tall dead seedless grasses of a long-forgotten summer, harassing the vulnerable and lost. Their disturbing torment ebbed and flowed, after a while fading away leaving an uneasy peace. But in the lull the sense of foreboding grew stronger.

The old Kauri fell into an apprehensive silence, hoping that the sky spirit would seek out others and leave him alone one more time. Aeom wondered how often he had sought salvation in that same pitiful hope, knowing that it was only a matter of time before his decaying grip on the earth would fail. Age weakened his ancient bones. Disease and biters; sap suckers and burrowers plagued him in cancers and sores, His battle to survive was brutal but not the only threat. He had watched his venerable family cut low before their prime by the skin and two. His noble ancestors once covered the vast lands in every direction. A great forest as old as time but now a distant memory, a corpse of shadows, consumed by the deep brown soils, giving life to others. A trembling ran through his heartwood; his shield of cleaved leaves shivered in agitation; his grief palpable to those who listened and awaited their own dread.

Aeom understood her Kauri's struggle, life with age grew more difficult to sustain, to summon up the will with every eventide, to find the strength to fight on, to hunt, to endure. For what? Bitter was the solitude in her bones, a distressful sense of loss that she had lived with for many seasons. In her youthful dreams the chicks had thrived and fledged. The sun's warmth filled her kin with hope and the pastures thrived with voles, shrews and mice. But then a skulking death left her eggs cold, the nest silent of gaping mouths and hungry calls for attention. The grim spread and it wasn't long before the white shadows of her offspring and her mate were ghosts that haunted the woods and meadows. Aeom, alone, was a specter of the past. She couldn't understand why she had been spared. Her existence was a torment of memories, a constant reminder of her unbearable loss. The ravages of time left her with fading eyesight, robbing her dominance in the fading light. But she also knew it wasn't just the passing seasons she feared. A new dread stalked the earth. There was an anger and unpredictable force tracking her every move. She had fled its wrath. But it was unrelenting. Drawn by her flight to the new land. Something she had not felt before and could not understand. There was the sense of hatred in the air. There was fear around her driven by an awakening, a stirring of a dark force. But as she journeyed, she felt something else, a strong urge to turn towards the sunrise, following rivers and mountains in hope of a new beginning. Of salvation.

Aeom was disturbed from her deep thoughts. Outside the burrow she heard the panic cries of surprise, the frenzied fluttering that marked a fatal attack. It lasted too long; a clumsy kill. Aeom's crushing, bladed talon and tearing beak were sudden and clean. The death throes of a flapping wing irritated, angered her pride. Inquisitive as to the butcher she majestically eased herself into the mouth of the burrow and blinked. Her tired eyes taking a few moments to adjust to the light. The old Kauri towered on the edge of a forest clearing with glimpses into the far distant north through broken canopies and to a water meadow where there should be good hunting to build her strength before she moved on.

Aeom listened to the twitching intermittent beat of feathers as life drained away. It spoke of fur and four. Disdainfully she turned her head to view the killer as it came towards her burrow through the undergrowth. A black, swollen, arched body and whip of a tail appeared. It was alone but there would be others; they hunted in packs. She caterwauled her contempt at the ill-bred rat. It dropped its kill in panic eyeing the ghost owl, assessing the risk. Seeing no

immediate threat, the creature recovered its confidence, chattering; warning Aeom that if she did not watch herself, he would return with others to deal with her. But it was only bluster to cover its vulnerability. If Aeom had been nesting, she would have worried for her young. Despite her age she was still more than a match for a grub of rats. Regardless, trouble would come of the attack. She understood that the rat's prey was a rare feather breed in the evergreen land. And that would mean revenge. Aeom had seen it before. A bounty would rain down from the sky. Tasty morsels of food that would bring a long lingering death and silence to the land. The rat's victory would be short lived. She screeched her anger. Their kind were stupid and careless, only advantaged by their numbers.

The Kauri groaned in sudden pain. A cloud burst of winds stormed across the land and pummeled the forest. Aeom caught a brief flicker of a white talon across the stone-grey sky. The probing attacks had begun. False night was growing but it would be a delusive night no creature would willingly venture out. She retreated into her burrow to wait and listen once more to her guardian's tales of self-pity. There was still a little time. Time for the scourging winds to beset them all. Unpredictable, bullying, probing, seeking weakness, then as they appeared, vanish without warning. While inexorably the malevolent sky spirit stalked ever closer.

Aeom accepted that neither she nor her Kauri could escape their entwined fates. Their past was a tragic echo that bound them together. So much had changed but so much was familiar to them. A land of the vanquished: a silent forest with no dawn chorus. Sickened trees; withered leaves; decaying bark, shedding life leaving only ashen grey bones of death, stark across the land. Rains that failed to come when expected. Ravaging fires hard on the heels of exhausting heat waves. Epidemics that thrived on the weakened and sick. Food that was once plentiful now so sparse. A dread that pervaded both their worlds.

Aeom's brooding was once more disturbed. A trembling growl that reached up to her from deep within the earth. She listened with growing alarm to her guardian as his grinding sinews and creaking limbs moaned in terrible anguish, to the drumbeat of the storm winds. The final onslaught had begun quicker than either of them had expected. Blinding white talons flickered with increasing intensity, striking deep across the gathering doom. Closer. Deafening thunder cracks. She tensed, tipping her head to listen, to the new sound. A gentle intermittent but persistent tapping echoed through the husk of the burrow. It grew more demanding. The tapping grew into a bludgeoning roar. Rain barraged across the fields, rampaging deep into the forest, crushing down vegetation, blinding the foolhardy that had ignored the warnings, penetrating every crevice and crack with cold icy fingers, ripping away life giving warmth.

The burrow was not immune. Weakened and decayed with age, rivulets of water started as a trickle, grew alarmingly into a flood, finding new chinks where none had existed before. Savage destruction bent its will upon the ancient Kauri, while cloistered deep within its heart, huddled in the darkest and deepest recess, Aeom cowered frightened and helpless. The fierce storm clawed into the ancient forest but was intent on old Kauri, snapping limb and brittle bough. They met in a titanic struggle, the ageless wind against Aeom's defiant guardian, as much a part of each other as the earth spirit that had once spawned them both. But there was more to the struggle. Aeom desperately tried to ignore the voices that screamed about her, she instinctively knew she was the quarry. Great forces far beyond her comprehension were consumed in a conflict that was part of the natural order but was unnatural in its focus and intent. She was a hunter and recognized as a predator she was now the hunted. The Kauri,

protector of his treasure, unbending in the storm's eye, instinctively shielded Aeom from their common enemy. The burrow awash and cold and convulsed alarmingly and repeatedly as if it intended the blows to dislodge her. It stunned her once proud form into pitiful submission. Her claws dug deep into the old Kauri's rotted flesh as she held on. Aeom waited for it all to end, no longer aware or caring.

The victorious sky spirit roared victoriously over the submission of the vanquished marked by the lack of continued resistance. Through the dull fugue that enveloped her, she sensed the angry voices starting to subside. Imperceptibly at first the thundering lessened then abruptly the rain stopped leaving a deafening peace. Trembling apprehension crept into the forest's survivors; none dared move, bemused by the sudden change and petrified the sky spirit would return. All listened and waited? The heavy sodden heavy drips an aftermath, breaking the unnatural silence. Aeom stirred, rousing as if from a deep sleep. What was wrong? She could not immediately tell but her bones felt deathly cold. The burrow was lifeless and unwelcoming, no longer a snug. Her Kauri protector silenced. Above Aeom, slashes of daylight ripped through the roof of the burrow. The storm had destroyed her guardian, robbed him of his head of branch leaving only a lifeless shard, half unearthed, leaning into the arms of the surviving bush, waiting to be laid to rest. Aeom understood. The ancient one was dead.

She moved, heavy with sorrow and in the realization that the Kauri had sacrificed himself for her. Why? What was happening to her, to her world? She struggled with the unnatural angle to the edge of the burrow. The future, her future was uncertain. Aeom's whole being was tired beyond her knowing with the battering that had assailed them both. She no longer knew what to do. She staggered into the light through the ruptured husk of the Kauri. The blasted desolation was overwhelming, but it was also a rebirth. The forest would begin all over again though many would not see it. They lay crushed under the destruction.

The sun's heat gently broke clear of the departing black clouds. Its warmth beat down. Wisps of ephemeral steam rose clear of debris - the dead released from their earthly bindings. Aeom closed her eyes to rest. There was nothing yet to be done. Time passed and with it her strength returned until she awoke with the dusk. Pangs of hunger but it was not just for food. Aeom's future lay elsewhere. She stretched her wings and felt the power and grace of the wind under her wings. The seasons fell away as she lifted skyward. Then the sky spirit pounced, rewarded for its deceit and patience and broke Aeom's world apart. A crackling thunderous roar of anger forewarned her he had never left but was prowling the shadows seeking the matriarch of the air. A searing white talon slashed the air around Aeom's soft flesh and gossamer plumage.

Aeom fell from the sky - in an instinctive feigned mortal embrace. As the earth rushed up, she caught a subtle cushion of air and at the very last moment splayed her wings and swept away, through the tall grass and bush. The ghost owl hidden in the dank shadows lost to view. Fleeing east with effortless grace, Aeom's perilous search for a new haven began. And with it the hope that she would find an answer to the life-force that called and to escape the dread that stalked her.

Appearing out of the gloom, came skin and two barely visible in their camouflage clothing.

“Bugger, bugger, bugger! Did you see where the white bitch fell bro?” The man cracked his shotgun, ejecting two smoking shells.

The other man, shook his head and spat to one side, pointing his rifle in the general direction of the last sighting. “Send in the dog?”

“Bloody right bro. I want those white feathers. She was a rare one. Haven’t seen her kind in thirty year. Let’s get it over with; get out of this bloody weather. I owe you a pint bro. Good spotting.”