

## The Hill Farm

by Jonathan Page

The chapel is triangles of white iron and the wind moves in the barley. He is hot in his new woollen suit, his limbs light with fear. Today he preaches. Today he follows in his father's footsteps. The old women are as short as children. Their eyes are black as the book they carry. Their clothes are old and clean and he has been transfigured.

There is tea later, small, white sandwiches on plain plates. The men stand with him, their hands rich with time and sun, mobile, expressive. They complain about the sale price of lambs. They complain about the usual, shivering rain and the sudden brief sun. Their talk shows acceptance of him and trains him to his position. He speaks in dry unthinking gout, neutral phrases that verge, he thinks, on nonsense, but the men grin and agree with him. He has done enough to warrant their respect.

He is alone at last. The road is little more than a path, high with grass at the centre. Twisted trees grow at intervals along the stone walls and the hill rolls away over its curve into black trees. Buzzards sail in a twisting circle. Their mewing has the silver clarity of bells. The world is old here and the farm with its thick walls is old - the small house and the barn and the sty where the nameless sow grows up into winter bacon.

I do not want to speak at chapel.

I do not want to lean upon the rail at market and speak of sheep.

I do not want my father dead.

My mother dead.

My sister married over the hill, who can no longer show me how to live.

But he is a farmer now and the Sunday preacher. He is transfigured against his inclination to remain behind in some older time, when he was only a silent scholarly boy. The sun drags its bright flags over the hills which are his and which are not his.

A soldier comes to the village, an Englishman with an oiled moustache. His belt and buttons shine with some other unimaginable life. War is here. The Kaiser is slaughtering nuns in Belgium. Will you fight for King and Country? He speaks in the square with the river running white and clean over the rocks at his back. He speaks in the hot white hall of the Anglicans to the uncomfortable ranks in their Sunday best and the young men step elated up onto the reverberating stage and are transformed by his proximity.

They go to see what is beyond the valley.

They go to lose themselves in some khaki other, to speak and feel differently.

But they cannot believe they are going. It is some ghost of themselves they are sending away, while they stay where they are, living the life they always have, the life of

their fathers and mothers and their fathers and mothers. The new soldiers look surprised by their going as they march to the omnibus that will take them to Ludlow. The village cheers them with furious, joyful incomprehension and deny them exit.

The preacher is not yet allowed to leave. The inheritance of farm and chapel takes precedence over youth. He speaks to a congregation that lacks its sons. The lovely ancient song of young men and women who see and find what is real in their bodies in the dust-dead ages of the chapel service is silenced. The young women are scared. It is as if they can see what is coming. It is as if the long service of their bodies to death and rebirth, to pain and the sorrow of servitude, had given them second sight. Now it is the men's turn to slave with the breath of annihilation on their necks. A union flag flies from a new pole on the hall, though he does not remember being asked.

The men write letters from embarkation camps in southern England, secret letters for the purses of their sweethearts and public letters that their fathers will read out loud and too cheerfully over the Sunday boiled mutton. The boring persistence of camp rituals, camp food, and rain-soaked marches seeps into the letters and calms the families who see the silent Cassandra daughters weeping at the rear of the chicken coop.

Only the sister writes to the young preacher farmer. His life is the maggoty tails of sheep, the lameness of sheep, the recovery of sheep from gullies, the writing of the weekly sermon, cribbed from the half-remembered sermons of his father. He walks under the endless space mapped out in buzzard calls and the wavering, trembling elegance of red kites. The hills curve away into their ancient selves and he follows what is ancient in him.

His sister sends the same letter every week. She is well. Her husband is well. What matters is the sending and the receiving. He plagiarises his replies also and never mentions the naked hills because the hills are in them both.

One Sunday he receives another letter. She is the chemist's daughter, a woman created from long looks across the tea table and the chapel pews. He stands in intense lightness in the lee of the corrugated hall to read what was crushed into his palm at the end of the service.

Forgive me for being so forward.

I have grown fond of you.

If you have any feelings for me...

There is bravery in the careful formula of the words. There she is, the dark-haired dark-eyed woman he thinks of by the stout coloured stream up on the high hills. There she is, starting into reality. He does not dance and she is shy and reads herself into liberty through modern poems, modern novels. So they walk the lanes after chapel, eat cheese and bread on a blanket at the stream that feeds the mill. The loneliness in him holds his tongue tight. She speaks of the world outside, what filters through to her from the salesmen that sell her father chemicals and medicaments. What she overhears at dinner from her father's friends on the board of commerce. Her hand sits dangerously in his and brings permanent change to the ground he walks upon. The violence in his heart is the wild weather and the sheep standing in ragged guard on the prow of the hill. What he knows is a chamber of moving images that flows all around her like a stream as she speaks. He kisses her mouth and his teeth bump against hers.

One Saturday she walks her dog up into his world.

From the ridge they inspect the stone permanence of the farm, its chains of dry-stone walls disappearing into bracken and hedgerow. Her dog races in circles with his sheep dogs. He holds a useless hand out to her as she balances on the stones of the stream.

I am in my mother's cold parlour with another human soul.

I have laid out my mother's best tablecloth and set out the tea things.

A fire burns where none has for years.

A fire burns where none has.

We are a fire.

She did not tell her father she was coming here today. He leads her, his hand a hard plea in her hand, up to the bedroom. Neither knows how it is done, though he has put the ram to the sheep often enough. There is no euphemism for skin, no true euphemism, in her advanced novels. Nevertheless they manage the ordinary miracle.

The match is acceptable to the chemist. The young man has property and there is the prestige of a preacher in the family, even if he is only a preacher in a tin chapel. He sits transformed in the chemist's front parlour watching his future father-in-law grow red and breathless as he shaves slices of lamb from the bone. The young couple shine with the idea that they are already free. The cool bedroom and the slow yellowing of the light in the folds of the blankets flow out of their hands as they cut the potatoes and boiled cabbage and attend the gossip from the chamber of commerce. He praises her mother's cooking and hears a far off echo of the father-in-law in his voice.

She wears an ivory dress and the sky is a sea in which the transparent chapel floats alone. The light lies in wide bars on the pews where white flowers grow on the uncomfortable suits of old men. The women cry. Her mother cries and her father crushes her hand as he walks her to the plain altar table. The air is full of motes and a fragile grey, like old lace. A slow flag of light is drawn over the hills as he turns his face to hers, in fear, in hope, in wonder.

Come on then.

What now, Thomas?

I must carry you over the threshold.

He carries her cases up to the bedroom. It is like a holiday, but there will be no end to it, no return home. The hired carriage is gone. Everyone has gone. She looks at the bare table and hears the wind howling in the dark of its throat at the smeared window and is suddenly afraid. She is crying when he comes thumping down into the room again. He kisses her teared eyes, understanding her, not understanding her. The generations stand warden in the thick dark of the yard and the difference between change and no change at all seems small.

I love you.

I shall make a fire.

I would like that.

He listens to the mother's story in the cold parlour. The net curtain traps the sound of children playing, a continuous circle of shoes, approaching, retreating. The sun is a circle between the coal-black houses and the cobbles are a shining blue. It is old as time in the black room, under the black clock. The mother does not believe what she says over the brown envelope and the stewed tea. Her boy died in the dust of Gallipoli. He saw the world or an unconquered cliff at any rate.

God bless you Mrs Protheroe. William is risen to Glory.

He drank pints with William on market day. Is William dead? He is listed under *Other Ranks* in the newspaper and there is the brown letter to prove it. Let us pray. But all he can hear are the happy screams of children.

The list of the dead and the relict grows within the body of the Sunday prayers. The young women stare with ancient wisdom at the mothers and the fathers and the grandparents turned to children by their loss.

Henry Jenkins is a wonderful shearer of sheep.  
Samuel Price is the best blacksmith in the valley.

Harry was.

Sam was.

The farm thrives under their joint care. The sheets snap on the line and her hair flows like the sea in the bright breeze. She slicks tar over the worn grey joists in the barn and he restores the distant, fallen walls that snake into the moor's darkness. The price of mutton rises and they read novels by the fire. More and more he surrenders his preaching to comrades in the chapel, on the excuse of farm work. He is not sure why he retreats from what was given to him to do. When the men gather round him in the hall after the Sunday service he finds himself distracted by the breathing light on the hillside.

Perhaps it is the sex that distracts.

Perhaps death.

One market day, after the auctions, he crowds into the Radnor Arms with the other farmers. Yellow smoke hangs under the ceiling. Dung, urine and sheep scent the air. The closed worlds of the farms flood into each other through tales of foot rot and flood, lambs that do not fatten, rams that do not tup. It is a place of joy. There is freedom for a short time from the discipline of the land.

One more, Tom?

No, I cannot. I must be getting back.

You are under the thumb, Tom.

He laughs, because some inner wall has come down since his marriage. She is the liberator. He sees the cream glow of her body in the bedroom darkness and shivers, though the pub sweats with men.

Still, it is time I went.

The daylight outside is a surprise. It is bright yellow squares in the deserted pens. The white face of the house opposite shines purely. An old woman, who barely comes to his not so tall chest, raises her smiling face to him. She too is washed with light and he returns her smile, expecting gentle small-talk, but the woman says nothing. Instead she presses a card into his hand and walks on. Her basket is full of cards. When he opens it he finds a white chicken feather and the message: Why are you not in uniform?

She continues to turn the mangle, pushing a fall of bubbled water out of the shirt. She does not shout or weep but she does not look up from her task.

You cannot go, Tom. It is not your place. You are the chapel.

The young men are all but gone from the pews. What is my excuse, Aggie? I need to help in some manner.

Help who, help what? Help others to their death in Flanders?

Do not be so dramatic. I am serious about this. I fear I am derelict in some way. Young men go in my stead.

It is you who are being dramatic. God, Tom. You must stay with me. I am not a farmer yet.

There is no argument except the absence of his generation from the hills but he cannot resist it. There is a magic to it that she cannot argue or love away. He signs his name in an empty church hall and is given leave to report back in a week, after he has settled his affairs.

The absence of another human being is seductive at first. The wind sucks through the slats of the barn and pushes the colour out of the long grass as it flattens it. Clouds of birds coalesce and scatter to constellations on hills that are all weather and the dimming and brightening of the ground. She reads by the fire in the howling house. She uses the unused white acres of the bed, scattering clothes, her things into the hollow where he used to lie. Even her sadness is sweet, in part, because she is free. The management of the flock has passed to their neighbours and only his sister visits, once, to see that she copes.

In the end she wants people and work. The day before her father comes with a pony and trap to take her and her things back down to the town she finally accepts that she is pregnant. She will not show for a month or two yet so when he comes, scarlet nosed and foreign to the farm, she asks to work in the shop, as she used to.

I am an assistant to an Anglican chaplain. I know how to talk to the chapel boys.

I am in France, I cannot say where. The guns are a thunder beyond the horizon. The blackbirds sing louder. The guns are an ingredient in their song.

She is glad he has what seems a safe occupation but does not tell him she is pregnant. She is trying to hold back time's flow as much as she is able to. She is trying not to move from the well worked ground of her late childhood: she works, she helps her mother in the kitchen.

June comes. She sits with her bump in the narrow back garden, dappled in light, watching the yellow back of the hills. A breeze seethes through the apple tree. In theory she is peeling potatoes but for the most part she drowns and dreams of her husband on the hill. There is talk of a great push to end the war once and for all. His letters confirm the assembly of a vast war machine. Adverbs and adjectives end in black pen where he has not been careful, but he is a good writer. He finds ways to suggest what he cannot describe directly. There is a grave excitement to the way he writes.

I am with child. I wish I had said before, I do not know why I did not. Perhaps I feared if you looked back something awful might happen – I would turn to salt or the shades of Hades would claim me.

I am afraid for you, though I know you are safe, or safe enough.

I am afraid.

Courage, my love. I shall be home soon enough. You have not seen the preparations here. Everyone is in good heart. I have seen such things...

David Jones is the boy for herding.

Albert Jones is like to sing at the drop of a hat.

Llewellyn Davies is good to his mam.

James Groves is the spit of his father, the Colonel.

Was.

Was.

Was.

Was.

And the sky is a black curtain to the north. And the hospitals map the regions and occupations in the bloodied bodies of the Pals brigades. And the chaplains and their staff are busy from noon to midnight, ushering men into the next world.

The tops of the hills are dusted with snow, the cloudy sky a slow boil of greys and sometimes yellows. She watches the long curve of track running wet and silver across a permanently dark land, her hands tight on the handle of the perambulator as if she might fall or float up into that darkness. She whispers nothings to the baby, to prevent her non-existence. Other young and not so young women wait unmoving as last night's rain slaps out of a broken pipe on the platform roof. Then at last the train comes, pushing through the cloud it creates, pouring a vigorous spire of smoke, alive, alive, huffing and squealing. The baby stares up at her, startled, and she offers her girl her finger to grasp.

Is it you?

Yes, Aggie.

The wound is a lucky one: part of his left foot and upper thigh are missing and he is still on crutches. Still, he will not have to go back. But there is lunch with his cautious, startled in-laws and an afternoon of ticking clocks and small talk about the baby before he says a word about the how or why of his wounds. They know the night is coming when they must bare their bodies to each other and they are strangers once more. They speak quietly of inconsequential things against a background of ticking clocks but the intensity of their feeling could easily transform into anger. That is what he feels.

I saw so many dying men, Aggie. I helped bury so many. I filled out the forms and coordinated with the graveyards. I transferred to an ambulance to get closer to the living. To help them before it was too late to do so. I served with a Quaker in a pale uniform of his own making... We were in a secondary trench, a quiet part of the line ...

He cries in jags because it is impossible to retrieve the truth of that other world. The dead Quaker is a story. The stretchered man who died at point of rescue. The months with the chaplaincy tending to the charnel house.

She does not tell him how their daughter nearly killed her. She does not mention the bed soaked in blood.

There, there.

And underneath her tenderness, a terrible, murderous anger. At first. Only at first.

In the New Year they go back to the farm. Sleeves of snow run from the barn's grey struts. The fields are dusty with snow and the house cold and mildewed. He walks without the aid of crutches at last, though he rocks from side to side as he walks, comically. Then the sunrise turns the hill to pale gold and the stand of trees by the pond flame red. Then the living room is a fire and a steaming tin bath and the baby waving its arms on the rag run. Then the desire comes again. Then his strength.

The flock returns to the hill. A new dog makes up, a little, for his lost agility. But quietly she gains on him: she shepherds, she goes out to the sick ewe and bottle feeds the orphaned newborns while he fevers in bed, or sleeps off another sleepless night of nightmares. She applies herself to the account books. He mothers the baby and grows used to partnership.

It is spring before they go to chapel again. He ducks when an Elder scrapes back his chair in the hall afterwards. Tea fills his saucer but there is no spillage. No old ladies rush to fuss over his wet clothes. Odd that he anticipated such an accident.

I do not know what you have gone through, Tom.

You do not want to know, Frank.

He thinks he has become a character. He watches the limping, timid man and does not believe him entirely. Does not like him entirely. He is suspicious of the other's motives.

Do not steal my farm from me, Aggie. It is my farm. My father's farm.

He does not know why he is suddenly so horrible to her, when her dreams, unfulfilled, were always quite different from his own. She has grown separate and strong in his absence. She endures. Underneath his tenderness is a murderous jealousy of her wholeness.

....

One night she wakes alone in the bed. The child sleeps in a cot at the foot of the bed and moonlight stripes the bedclothes. The window chatters in a tugging wind. It soughs when she opens it a crack to look down at the barn where a lamp is lit. She supposes some earlier than usual start, an activity to combat sleeplessness. She loves him. The pang inhabits the square of window. She sleeps again.

In the morning the bed is still empty but there is the baby to attend to. She stands in the yard with the baby in her arms scanning each hillside for him. The dog is not there, he is with the sheep. He is up among the crags. The wind furrows the grass and makes it seem like hair.

She washes the clothes in the stone sink at the end of the garden. The sky is mountainous and her feet are light, as if gravity were undone. The baby crawls on the grassy strip between the vegetable beds. She has not written a poem for months.

Where are you, Thomas?

The sheets are flags on the line and the farm looks clean in the light. The stone walls unravel to the horizon and she follows it, the baby strapped to her back in a length of muslin. There are the bent trees she knows, threaded with grey wool. There is the stream running black among reddish rocks.

She climbs the stile onto land that is nearly moorland, the grass islanded with tussocks of thicker grass and the sky is now a rolling grey that may turn to rain. The ancient dyke is underlined with shreds of mist like thin cotton wool. It is like standing in a crowd, there is so much time left behind here. The dyke watches her.

Hallo, Tom. Hallo.

She needs must go back soon, her baby cannot get a chill.

Aggie. What are you doing here?

He is like a black wet tree His jumper shines and his hands are black on the spade. She goes to the dry stone wall, expecting to see the signs of repair, the fallen yellow dust, the scraps of unused or discarded stones. She is ready to tell him off for leaving her alone so long, the story is already ended. And then she sees the lines of shallow pits. Four rows, six pits to a row. The dog watches from under a stunted bush.

My god, Tom. It looks like a graveyard.

He looks wonderingly where she looks, as if he had nothing to do with it.

I helped organise the digging parties. I hardly dug, though I did some digging, sometimes. We buried them close to where they died, in pits sometimes, sometimes individually. I felt those temporary graveyards might grow to permanency in time. I wonder if they will trouble to move so many to a permanent home.

And who are these graves for? There are no soldiers to bury?

But there are. I am burying my congregation. That is David Jones' grave there and that is Albert's.

They are all in France, Tom.



That they are. But I must dig to them to be sure. It helps me. I am not mad.

I did not think you mad.

I do not want to preach again.

No.

The rain shines the roofs of the barn and the house to purple and the stones glimmer with silver. The sheets are left to soak. The baby is warm inside his coat, only the top of her head is exposed, strikingly fair and pink, to the rain, as they zig-zag down the sheep tracks to home. When they are inside they strip themselves naked – water is boiled on the stove and the fire stoked up from its low, red life. They wash each other with carbolic. The baby sleeps. They carry her up to their room and lay it in the cot and climb into the cold sheets. He kisses her mouth and his teeth bump against hers.

My mother's parlour is my parlour.

My father's farm is my farm.

Our farm.

Our hills.

The dead do not stand guard on the hill or in the sparse rooms of the house. They are with us but we are alive. I shall write a book because I wish to. I shall raise our daughter to farm after us.

Thomas Evans builds a good wall, I will give him that.

Agatha Evans is a modern woman. They say she is writing a book.

Their daughter runs laughing through the whipping grass and the clouds bloom cream and precise over the hills.

Jonathan Page works as a Technical Author for a software house near London. He returned to writing short stories and poems in 2015, after working on a novel, a literary thriller set in Victorian London, for some years. His story 'The Teacher' won the 2016 Earlyworks short story prize, and two of his stories were published in 'Journeys Beyond', an Earlyworks anthology. He reads literary fiction, poetry and art history and is mildly addicted to the gym. The writers that have influenced him include Louis MacNeice, Louise Gluck, E L Doctorow, Jenny Erpenbeck, Adam Thorpe and John McGahern, among others. He lives near Cambridge with his wife and children, but would love to live somewhere wilder and hillier one day.