

Preview

Ten Poems and *Wilderness* Introduction including prose and *George Jeffreys:*

21: George Jeffreys Woke Up in the Wilderness poem followed by *George*

Jeffreys: 22

From Jennifer Maiden's *Appalachian Fall: Poems About Poverty in Power*

George and Clare: *Back in the Wilderness*, including *George Jeffreys: 21:*

George Jeffreys Woke Up in the Wilderness

George Jeffreys: 22: *George Jeffreys Woke Up In Thirroul Again*

Wind-rock

Posing a political threat

The Mystery

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Hillary and Eleanor: 15: San Francisco Bay

Jimmy Carter: One: Pretty Saro

Jimmy Carter: Two: Dylan Thomas

Diary Poem: Uses of the Appalachian Fall



George and Clare:

Back in the Wilderness

(This prologue to my next George Jeffreys poems mirrors the structure of the Introduction to the first George Jeffreys poems in Friendly Fire, again including autobiographical background and prose fiction narrative, but newly interposes a verse fiction piece)

Few writers have had the historical distinction of being sacked at their own launching. If one is, the reasons won't be political, or economical (since I was Government supported and also willing to pay my own way): rather, apparently to do with unpopularity, if perhaps in some numerical aspect. A launching speech, for example, said that Australia wasn't ready for me - and that maybe in 'another time or another country' someone would be.

Perhaps, nevertheless, you are ready, as you are my other time and my other country.

Also: since I am not a courageous person, courage means much to me, and I've known no courage more difficult than this one now, of having to contradict for their own sake some in invincible authority whom I had only just realised how much I indelibly loved.

Even over twelve years ago, I had to fight tooth and nail (when I still had all my teeth and nails) to retain the prose George Jeffreys explanatory Introduction in *Friendly Fire*. A mystery. The politics in it? The sex in it? The miscegenation between prose and poetry? Prose at all? Explaining at all? But we are human - we are necessarily in love with explanations.



Probably the miscegenation. But now we know that prose and poetry enhance each other, just as digital and print do, and the two genders of the imagination. So the prose/poetry courtship again:

George Jeffreys: 21:

George Jeffreys Woke Up in the Wilderness

George Jeffreys woke up in the wilderness. It took

the form

of the Thirroul bedroom they were house-sitting again,

its walls

a wilderness with prints of Shead's D.H. Lawrence

series, a chaos

in rose-clear but thorny colour. The noise of the sea swarmed

through the summer rooms, and the baby, Corbyn,

in a doze

on Clare's breast was dreaming, like an animal whose eyelids

dramatically follow some action, still private and soon forgotten.

As often, and as fitting for the scene, their

conversation

played around sex as sex played around the edges

of all else in the room. George had been jotting down

more of his memoirs, The Haunted Brothel, as he held



*the baby in a rocking chair all night. Clare had at last slept,
a cotton swathe between her thighs for the postpartum
lochea that had lasted long, because of her age
and tension.*

*It was the fine tears, stretched cuts on the vagina and its lips
and the way they channeled blood that confirmed skin
was in itself an experiencing organ, not just some soft
envelope to breathe from other feeling. He remarked,
'I'm finding the sex as difficult as Lawrence did, to write.*

*It must be portrayed with justice, like the visible
universe*

*of Conrad, although justice always seems to have its
own*

*literary merits.' Her bleeding and the baby still had
that smell*

*of rubbed vanilla biscuits. She said, 'And again
that portion*

*of insurrection.' He agreed: 'And writhing with his
heroic*

embarrassment, and the older and closer he got



to description,
the closer to the mine of his father socialism, literally
bedrock.'
To help the birth, she had gripped aside her clitoris
like a switch
and around it everything was swollen, but the wrinkles on
her stomach had re-absorbed neatly. At first she had
expected it to stay like a sodden dishcloth. Distracting herself,
She said, 'I always liked the way Brigid Brophy said that sex
shouldn't be justified by literary merit, as if to suggest
all art
was just an antiseptic. Do you think it's just the
irritation makes
me want to come all the time?' He laughed: 'They're valid themes:
the sexuality of irritation, of impatience. But it's probably to relax
nerves and clean the wounds. At my age you identify
the function
of every profound emotion.' They tucked sleep-sighing Corbyn
into his cot beside them. George let her place his hands along
the forming scars until she writhed back, not gasping but



breathing out shortly, in almost exasperation:

the antiseptic,

they both thought, of reducing the soul to a function. Because she had come and they had talked, the way she stroked him until he too came too was at least again beyond the functional-reciprocal, he thought. Her cellphone sang and he lifted the woken Corbyn, now near to smiling.

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So, Baby Corbyn appears in safe hands.

Still, I hope you are discouraged by my fate : at 68, reduced to being made an example.

To quote Thomas Hardy in his rare grimace of mirth:

— "You left us in tatters, without shoes or socks,
Tired of digging potatoes, and spudding up docks;
And now you've gay bracelets and bright feathers three!" —
"Yes: that's how we dress when we're ruined," said she.

*

George:

I observed, as my fingers rubbed backwards with astringent knuckles along her soft tired body: 'There is that old use of things apolitical, safe, dated a decade politically, or century-old avant-garde, to cuckoo



anything inconvenient out of the nest. Not that it need pose a political threat...'

She smiled, managing a short catlike stiffness: 'It doesn't, does it?'

I continued: '...but that the powerful - including Orwell's "shiny-bottomed bureaucrats" - have to be seen by the other powerful to be doing their bit to support the structure. The Overton window moves back to the right. The next "radical" will be a baby traditional Marxist - doing nothing because everything has to happen at once - or someone only slightly to the left of Julia Gillard.'

'But will they?', she asked, as she stretched out, it seemed at last without pain.

*

It seemed...

Clare, George and Baby Corbyn seemed to me to be prepared for the wilderness again.

George Jeffreys: 21:

George Jeffreys Woke Up In Thirroul Again

George Jeffreys woke up in Thirroul again, a windy

wilderness

of black sea-night threshing in waves at the french

windows. He



channel surfed the wilderness TV, the quiet baby Corbyn
on his knee but not asleep. George remembered that his grandson
and daughter had been stormy babies but had deeply

slept

more than this one. Here, you looked back checking

and the eyes

were open. George and Corbyn watched the screen

together. Trump

was explaining another liason with the Russians, but

slapped

more sanctions on them. George suggested to his son:

'They may have agreed to this as a sort of trade

concession in return

for no one carving up the Middle East.' Somewhere

behind

the lustrous lapis eyes, the baby stored that. Clare

called out,

'But he kept the Deep State and the Appalachians

happy

by banning trans-sex in the Military. It's his trade-offs



that worry
me most.' The baby seemed to nod, and Clare came
out from the bedroom,
tying the satin sash of a wrap too tight around her
waist,
that was so much more finely defined now between
her hips' silk and her breasts. She had woken in a
fevered mix
of ardour and irritation, satisfied both moods by
kneeling down
beside them, her moist head on his other knee, in
eye-equality
with the baby, who
crowed with pleasure, suddenly. Clare's
nocturnal marine eyes looked more blue in the TV
light. They
didn't use the TV as much now, more the internet, but
it was still the best nursery nightlight ever. He rested
his free hand on
her hunched shoulder, then when that was accepted, his



fingers

deep in her sleep-thick hair. She said, 'Idris said on the

phone

the Russians still seem okay about him working out

his bitcoin

for the Palestinians. It must be that the Israelis have

accepted the idea.'

'Or some of them' amended George: 'It's still that thing

my old mate in Langley said about Intelligence: it's

always made

of heads that hate each other, but I grant you Tel Aviv

has less of them than Washington.' She said, 'I'm sick

of murder',

meaning her own and every other that they had ever

witnessed, as if permitting their own tamed trauma

the wildness in stylised ballet. The ballet of Trump

and Russians

progressed on several channels. She said, 'Well, MI6

is still in

strategic retreat after creating Isis, hopefully. It gives



Trump scope
to do these great Russian *pas de deux*. The man is
Nureyev'. She
didn't know the name of a more modern Russian
dancer, but
thought there had probably in limbed male passion
never
been another Rudy, anyway: 'although Trump hardly
walks straight
on the tarmac.' She had started to absorb the
peacefulness
of little Corbyn's eyes and George's fingers. She said,
'You're not
angry with me any more.' He answered, 'Well, you
didn't die
in childbirth, did you?' She pursed her lips as if testing
wine
on her tongue tip: 'Well, I did try not to, for your sake.
It was lucky
he arrived before the ambulance, however. I survive



much better when I'm in charge these days.' The blue
breeze
from the wall of windows reached their skin, driven
by the knowledge that dawn was arriving. In its
summer duplicity, it
was both like a fevered hand and the ice it craves. She
settled
herself on the floor more comfortably, felt calmer, let
her skin
drink the air as they watched the news in its
comfort-rhythm
break bearably like adult grief in waves.

Wind-rock

Trump always walks uncertain, braced for wind-rock.
Wind-rock is good for plants, doubles their grip
in the earth, unless they blow away or their soil does,
unless the wind dries out their sap like fire. Nietzsche
had much to answer for, including the thought that



anything makes one strong that doesn't kill one. One keeps thinking of Causley's poem about Katharine of Aragon: 'O the Queen of Castile has a daughter, torn out by the roots. Her lovely breast in a stone cold chest under the farmers' boots.' Wind-rock seesaws, doesn't tear, but if one is in power how much can one bear of the ruthless velocity in air, I wonder. Wind-rock lines the face with its small contradictions, deeper forever until the wrinkles bleed, until the feet tilt height-sick on the ground. So the powerful hold on, like damp sheets on a clothesline. Now, for nothing, I recall the feel of sheets in their grasping, groping wind-rock roaring damp in the back yard on the face of the entangled child in them dancing. The wind smells like skin in drying cotton, carries with it the strength of everything it touches, to embrace, brace and blend into a finish. Trump's erratic pace wind-rocked staggers stubborn with its hunching at growth and gust in air and no escape.

Posing a political threat

It seems a topic that would suitably fit the discussion of poverty in power: that once



I asked publishers if they had tried to stop
my work because of politics and they said
no, of course, and that I was deluded if
I thought my work posed a political threat.
I am me, and tempted to joke, if that
joke is close to despair and lives
like a ghost in the fisted heart, that
obviously, they didn't mean they might
want it more threatening. Could it perhaps
be they wanted me less deluded... but
when then have I ever thought my work
would alarm authority ever?

But now I remember
there is the power of the apolitical, which
cuckoos out all others. There are forever
powers from the political obvious, like the child
from church asked what did the vicar talk
about? 'Sin'. What did he say about it?
'He was against it.' That will certainly well cover
most questions of cruelty and race. To complicate,
there are reasons of sensible taste or cash, to prove
political threat irrelevant to topic. Indeed, the best
influence I remember wielding is when a late
Australian Democrats Leader told me that
my poem about her sustained her, through deep



depression, after she had opposed the first
American Gulf War. Some friend of hers sent
it to her. I never met her. On the phone later
she said she'd held onto the poem's words
about 'resurrection'. Since she's dead, and I live
anyway, old and explicit, I will tell you about
some more she told: that when she gave her speech
against that war, at the National Press Club,

straight after,

someone phoned in death threats and the police
made a cordon suddenly around her. She said
she was so afraid that she retreated to the toilets,
where her periods started from terror,
but was still proud of her action. It's when one is most
afraid that one is most a woman, but maybe that
becomes the time of greatest resurrection. If

I have never

posed a threat to anyone in power, dear great good
spirit of the universe give me this,

O Frightened Lady: let

my work be as posed as real insurrection, let my threat
be in positioning, not diction, an equality in stature
with the weakness I enshroud. One makes a threat
from below or above, not looking in the eyes. One could



look in the eyes from where I stood:

sometimes the eye had power,
but it stored its waiting message in the blood.

The Mystery

(Jessica and Malcolm were requested by Joanne Burns)

George Lansbury woke up on Lady Martin's Beach. Malcolm Turnbull sat reading, solid and life-wan like George himself quietly next to two ladies, both of whom seemed now to be George's granddaughter, Angela, except that one wore silk and looked filmy and beachy, the other wore a suit and sat on a blanket, typing, but never losing track of something in the bushes. The silky one with the soft sun-raised arm rose in welcome. Malcolm helped her up, as if expert in aunt-lifting, although she was his third cousin, and the other woman fiction. The other one said, crisply to George: 'I'm Jessica Fletcher', but with a strong, bright welcome, went on writing. It was this one, thought George, who might at last give them all a verdict, but Malcolm seemed to need more than that, and urgent. Angela said, 'Please don't expect her to interact. She isn't real. I made her. The novel that she writes is called 'Appalachian Fall: A Season for Death', and is meant



to show how American poverty creates the last advent of apocalyptic power: in this case, murder. I know because I wrote it. 'There is no such novel', the Prime Minister laughed, 'But the thesis sounds like something that my mother might in her American phase have written.' George wasn't confused by their banter. He knew his granddaughter supported Labour, but the mystery was Malcolm. Malcolm who had tried to budget down Welfare - how ever could kind Lansbury blood drumming through the pitying heart allow that? Angela thought of Ronald Blythe's essay on her grandfather, how it said that, in some, socialism was just a penchant for tidiness, but how his had represented the antithesis of that, removed park fences, let the public in, tried to oppose the Second World War until he accepted it for want of a better method, always plagued the Home Office with exceptions: every case seeking refuge exceptional, Blythe observing, parenthetical, that God knows how many lives the old man saved. As she typed, Angela the novelist wrote death. Malcolm sat down beside. He said, 'It would be easy to deny the mystery, and I tend to do that, as a policy, so that even if I horribly inherit a plan to foist a couple of awful islandfuls of Dispossessed onto the Appalachians and the Rust Belt, I cheerfully convince the President his surprise isn't normal. There was good PR in that.' The moving fingers didn't slow their pace. He thought of the old



poem he'd learned at school, 'Nor all your tears wash out a word of it.' She said, 'There are assassins in the bushes, and a race with machetes is what simple survival seems simply to need where you want to work these days.' The other Angela seated herself on the sand, held out her creamy arms, and George reclined like a Victorian picnic with the ladies. The pretty beach was such a nun-embroidered handkerchief, Malcolm thought, long-won, short-won, superlative with lace. 'I don't own the beach,' he admitted, 'Just the view. And if a boatload or bushload or both of men with long knives foam in from the dark, I cannot reach my home in time to transform and defend it, since - unlike you, Angela - I have no other forms. To turn into a Lansbury at last is not open to me. Perhaps that was your ending?' The light from the priceless harbour glinted on the keys. If that was the end, she wasn't spoiling it. Her hands continued, neat, plump, white and busily in concert with her brain. The women's hair was blonde, the hair of both men grey. He listened for the motor's song, and packed his book away.

The Thousand Yachts

(The concepts of Slessor failing to acknowledge his Jewish ancestry and that images of the diaspora are present in his work in the form of light are from theses of Ivor Indyk, but the critic in the poem is not the latter, but a composite of many commentators, including Slessor himself).



Kenneth Slessor woke up in the Rocks, near the Museum of Contemporary Art, the black Harbour in front of him stinging in his ears and eyes with silence, as it rocked where it sat like a sleeping mother, just a bit, as it always does at night. There was no one left with whom he wished to speak, except one critic. The critic walked with him across from the drab buildings brilliant in the water. Slessor noted, alert, that their shadows were agitated, loose in moving, although their gait was neat. He said, 'Grace Perry, being a medical doctor, used to say that I only stopped writing because of my liver: propping up the bar at the Journalist's Club'. His companion had a light voice, apparently at ease in being politely parallel: 'The Journalist's Club doesn't exist any more...'. Slessor went on: 'It's alright. I never need to drink now, although this teasing Harbour always looks alcoholic . That is what men write about when they write about drowning, you know, they really



write about plunging death-deep into drinking. But you seem a sober man.' His critic's shadow ever shook or expanded like the discrete water, but their pace was steady on, towards the bridge, if then they turned and walked the pace again, quite like two professors in a college garden. The critic said, 'One thesis was that you stopped writing poetry because you'd lost your ancestry: your European influences becoming too distant and you losing the importance that your father had been Jewish.' Slessor in turn became parallel, and literally, as he found the other man could not be accompanied easily, unless the pose confronted. He walked ahead somewhat, then turned to face him: 'At the time, I said I stopped writing because of the death from cancer of my wife, Noela.' He still could hardly bear to include her name and "death" in a sentence together, but took comfort in adding the fact of cancer: more than wine, it is facts in which a journalist seeks oblivion, even if the facts are sometimes wrong, he thought, as his



had been occasionally at *Smith's Weekly*. He went on:

‘With the Lindsays at the time and others, there was much silly talk of the Muse being a woman: capricious, away with her period, or such. By them, I was assured that my poetry would return. But it did not. ’ The moon came out capriciously and the sudden Harbour showed briefly the colour of Noela's dove-grey eyes, then vanished back into its nightmare's edge in blackness. The critic saw it, too, perhaps, remarked 'Behold thou hast dove's eyes', out to the deep, as if the memory of some line or other could torment him in its anchored speculation. He seemed a man who murmured to suggest significance. He added, 'I saw time sailing like the thousand yachts', which might have been a favourite line from Slessor. Slessor nodded: 'And perhaps that is the diaspora: the thousand sharded lights returning, like the billow from a ferry under stars. But I was never conscious of a need for home. I found one in power every time I ran a paper: *Smiths*, or the *Telegraph* later. When one's home is really power, perhaps, one never has a need for poetry and, indeed, verse was always



as painful to write as it's reputed to be, when I did it. Noela was in it because she gave the power of mad magic:

It was right to discover my father was a mystic, if of course he was also agnostic. So was she. My mother the Hebrides-dour protestant didn't like her. You can feel the pull between them in the poems, that religiosity means not enough imagining, not too much. Noela' - just to say the name again incarnate justified this - 'Noela was - is - rather a frightening woman, although slight in her appearance. You know her father was a murderer, hanged at Bathurst before she was born? He chopped up most of a Bank Manager's family with a hatchet. Maybe it was my *Smith's Weekly* heart, but I found that quite exciting.' The critic still facing him in the lapping dark, offered: 'I sometimes do use the autobiographical.' His voice had risen, to sound emboldened to suggest an opinion, although, thought Slessor, the young mannerisms masked a different man. They both had child's eyes, though, looking at each other, forgetting to blink in their limpid concentration. Slessor still wore a slight moustache which made him appear younger, as did



the high smooth forehead of either. There could have been an air of innocence and power: the wry-lipped combination that stoops to charm and then discards it curtly, to confuse the friend as much as the opposition, or more. A thousand yachts were competing for the prize once. Now Slessor saw only out there the sparkling harbour ferry, from which his friend had drowned, the still dove's gaze that would have made poetry agony, not for nothing he a warco, she a nurse, and he longed from rib to groin for the simplicity of *Smith's Weekly*, whilst this man before him seemed obsessed with Promised Land. 'But it is', said the critic, understanding: 'The Israel of poetry you lost, too: all your influences from the German Jew: the lyricism and the studied sadness. *Five Bells* teases about mourning and plays with death like Dickens. The thousand yachts should return to one small harbour like this one, which can uniquely support them in their loss.' It seemed to Slessor now that the successful vulgarities of *Smith's Weekly*, and the unsuccessful vulgarities of the Lindsays, were part of what he had needed to blend in the poetry



with the harbour-wet, slippery sublime. He explained:
'When she died, I lost the energy to combine them:
the vulgarity and the high holy were sealed away
in separate suitcases, to open one at a time. I was
correctly dressed at all times: for club or power.' The critic
suggested, back to the murmur: 'And power, of course,
steals energy, doesn't it? It doesn't give it...Did you think
you'd lost your soul?' It was Slessor's turn to be parallel:
'When I read Indyk's thesis, I was reminded that as a boy
I first wrote poems for my father. I had thought them
really for my mother, but since he found the soul
in the diaries again, I do see what happened: the hunger
roaring from the elaborate menu. Was it right,
I wonder, that I wanted from my father the old music
that he had lost as a profession, becoming so very
inland as a Mining Engineer? This place is never'
- his gesture swept the Harbour, suddenly as
agitated as their wind-warped shadows - 'inland at all,
is it?' The critic said, 'I grew up by the sea
here, thinking always I would soon possess its richness.



And sometimes you gave that to me.' The Harbour emptied
of any ghosts but the moon, and they still stood facing
each other, sought the power to sail free.

Hillary and Eleanor: 15:

San Francisco Bay

Eleanor Roosevelt woke up in yet another hotel room, this time in San Francisco in fresh March. Hillary Clinton was just back from the Professional Businesswomen in California Conference, and looked as if San Francisco were wine, and she a maenad prancing processionally, giddily, into Eleanor's old arms. Hillary exclaimed, 'My God! Spring in San Francisco. I want to put some flowers in my hair!' The only flowers in the room were a bouquet of baby's breath and daisies from a fan. Eleanor said, 'I think that might make rather a mess, dear. Anyway, I believe that song spoke about the summertime, not spring.' But her newly woken fingers found their life again in Hillary's soft hair. Eleanor - who forgot nothing, had not forgotten the bayonet that was used to sodomise Colonel Gaddafi, and how Hillary had been so ecstatic about his death on TV, but she saw that this ecstasy was not that one. She saw that this mood was the peace that follows loss, when the loss is not of living blood and flesh. They held hands on



the floral puffed coverlet, looked out at a view of the Bay.

It was flat and mirrory, as often, but its synapse-soothing shine dropped Hillary's voice to a whisper, still happy: 'It's full of sharks, yachts, ducks and suicides, as always, Eleanor,' with her head a dollar-gold harbour on Eleanor's firm shoulder. She said, 'At first, I thought they gave it to Trump because I was too tough: they thought I'd wedge Russia too much on Syria, to impress the Senate, score myself a Supreme Court Judge, and Putin wouldn't back down, so I'd cause World War Three, or something. But, now, it seems they thought I'd be too canny when they dished the propaganda: that my knees wouldn't jerk enough.' 'It is true, my dear, you do not have jerky knees', said Eleanor, 'and Trump as a businessman has knees that bend in any poll direction. At first that gave one hope, of a rather macabre nature, but once he sacrificed General Flynn as National Security Adviser, it was clear that he might scare in any undesirable direction.' The Bay fluttered, glowed in night. Hillary said, 'I miss dark eyes. She doesn't contact me much, but I guess without the White House I'm not much use to her. It seems I am still some use to you, my love, however.' It wasn't a remark for response, except the endearment, and Eleanor kissed the little fisted hand, and placed it gently on the leggings. 'Korea', she said, 'and the Mother of all Bombs on that Afghan ant's nest, will need you to seem restrained in contrast. Now you are the ideal that should have been and you suggest



Stephen not Vince Foster. You are Appalachian Queen,
the Mother who would have saved, and kept the secrets.
Take off the *Wild One* coat, the blossom blouse, and get you down
to work the crowd again: no San Francisco summer, just
New York, in its black-ice spring, where you belong.' 'And if
I don't', teased Hillary, 'You still will stay?' For the Tammany
was gone so no End of Days would come
and she knew that the old lady wouldn't leave her.

Jimmy Carter: One:

Pretty Saro

Sara Carter Bayes woke up at the 2017 Presidential Inauguration, next
to her 92 year old distant cousin, Jimmy Carter, then the oldest
Ex-President to attend such an event. If he had to be accompanied
by some stranger from the afterlife, he thought, he'd have preferred
Dylan Thomas, whose poetry he cherished. So why wasn't this woman
Dylan Thomas? She was here for a purpose, no doubt. His wife, Miss
Rosalynn, smiled in spite of the tension that had to be inherent
in a Trump Inauguration. Outside, women prepared to march in fluffy
pink pussy ears. Miss Rosalynn wore a lot of black and white, a smart



spotted scarf and smiled the smile of she who has sat through peculiar ceremonies in Africa. He knew why he loved her. She smiled interestedly at Sara, who might have been anyone, but dressed in splendour in silken jazz age drapery, one step ahead, Miss Rosalynn supposed of Carolina Herrera. Sara said, 'When you're from West Virginia, you dress as best as you can when you make a bit of money, you show that they can do that where you came from. They like that where you came from, in the little shops and farms. ' Jimmy nodded, 'It was the same in Georgia, where we came from.' He remembered now this woman singing songs on the radio, in nights smelling indelibly of peanuts and exhaustion. The singing Carter Family who found songs anywhere, made them respectable, gave a voice to poverty so fatal it could only express itself in music. I won't be hungry in heaven. I won't have lost you, love, in heaven. You'll be sorry when they find me in the river, the cold rushes. I'm a thin boy selling papers because mother says my father is a drunkard. Starved. Miss Rosalynn was talking to someone beside her. He said, 'You were lead singer, Sara. I always liked your voice, and that loud guitar behind you. Was that played by your sister?' 'Sister-in-law. My cousin Maybelle. She was better, you know, than Robert Johnson. That old question, 'Who's



playing the second guitar?', when there wasn't one, was appropriate to her as well, but no one said she'd done a deal with the Master of the Crossroads. She was a pretty little lady, at first wore glasses. I was more classic in appearance.' He said, 'You still are,' not lying. She had the dark distant expression of a painting: strong bones, mountain eyes. Singing, her voice was deep and harsh but soothed, uncannily like a cross between a violin and buzzsaw. He recalled: 'Wasn't there a scandal?' Miss Rosalynn smiled at them, encouraging vaguely. She and her companion were discussing the blue dress worn here by Melania Trump. Already it was being said it resembled the outfits worn by the French Team in *Harry Potter*, but in fact it was Ralph Lauren cashmere wrapped in crossovers, the blue not French but unprovocatively childlike and pale. He had thought once Melania was a sleeper, since her father was a Slovenian Communist, but now she just seemed frail. For some reason, he was touched by the matching high heels. Sara was puzzled by the dress: it did not have the straight filmy lacy flow she thought was luxury, but she continued: 'There was no scandal: there was only me... A.P. was away quite often and I had to run the farm, the crops and the three children. I found new songs, too, sometimes in churches, but not so peripatetically. He could come home with one-legged



black men, not that they didn't know good music. I didn't learn to read music, but when I first recorded my voice was as high as a train going into a tunnel. I dropped the pitch to move the sound around. I did it by smoking cigarettes. Once I was doing that, I wore trousers, too, and went out hunting. Didn't kill much, but it soothed me, firing off that rifle. Then I fell in love.' 'I'm not surprised', said Carter, 'I once annoyed people by referring to "Adultery in the heart". I can see why I was an annoying President. That was the closest that I ever came to the obligatory satyriasis.' He seemed amused, however. She said, "This wasn't in the heart. It was Coy Bayes, A.P.'s cousin. So we went around like lovers, until his family discussed it, all moved together to California, took him with them. A.P. already had the devil's temper, shook all the the time from some infirmity, but he did love me. I went on singing the songs to get the children money , but I lit out back to my own people, on the other side of the mountain, and then I only came back and slept there at Maybelle's, or if the children were unwell.' Sometimes, she still had poverty's formal diction: 'Anyway, at last there was a happy ending. Six years later, I'd divorced A.P., and we were all singing on this really widely broadcast radio - quite the new invention. Coy hadn't answered my letters (his Ma hid them), but I thought he



might still have ears to listen, so I introduced a song "To my friend, Coy Bayes in California." No one could believe it.' Carter thought Dylan Thomas might have been less entertaining. He asked, 'What was the song?' *'I'm thinking tonight of my blue eyes.'* He knew that one, recited: "*Would been better for us both if we'd never/ in this wide and wicked world had never met/for the pleasure we've both seen together/ I'm sure, love, I'll never forget...*" That must have got him?' 'Sure did. He said to his Ma, "I'm going to get her". She said, "I think maybe you'd better" . He drove all night to Tennessee to find me. We were married three weeks later. He was truly still the prettiest young man. We went back to California, without ever me singing unless I wanted, or ever learning music. God was good,' she added, with one of piety's graceful addenda. He thought she had once been the preacher of a vast vulgate bible, had grated to America its soul. He thought : we knew ourselves when we heard it: the low gut-scream of hunger, for some food, some pride, for any sort of civilising action, answered passion, and if all these people were Trump voters, maybe that in fact was why he couldn't despise their desperation. And who but Trump or Bernie Sanders would dare to prevent the TPP? No one cartels like a rich man, but Carter thought if Trump were a drug he'd be generic. His attempts at copyright were always too legal clumsily and he had the truculent passivity



of an old man less bewildered by the small. Sara was becoming distracted by the strangeness of the dresses. He refocused her wistfully: 'Did you ever shoot a swamp rabbit?' She considered, alertly: 'Why, no, but I've seen them. Big things with big teeth and very unpredictable, especially in the water.' She giggled, her face's dignity rippling into arch Appalachian: 'Why, Jimmy, did one chase you?' She was Saro now, not Sara. He could recall that the other Dylan (Bob) tried numerous times to record the old song, from the Appalachians, '*Pretty Saro*', didn't succeed. You had to accept it was all about money: '*My love she won't have me/And I understand./ She wants a freeholder/And I have no land./I cannot maintain her/I've no silver and gold/Can't give her the fine things/That a big house will hold*' was the version he'd heard himself. He said, 'Yes, a swamp rabbit chased me. I was in a boat and I was President, fishing. It swam over, tried to jump in. I think that hounds were chasing it. I splashed it and it left. The press made a big joke of it, but it was feral. I don't know what so alarmed me, Saro.' He thought: if she understands this, she will understand Iran, and that I did better with Egypt and Israel, that my prestige has gone up since I left office. She said, 'Well, you could have shot it, but they don't eat well.' Still she continued to watch intently as he spoke, with an Appalachian earnestness now: in photos, her face when she sang.



She thought: he follows strange roads - so did I, after all. He's talking about lands, of course, not rabbits in the river. Some of these coats on the women looked like something A.P. would wear in winter. They obviously don't need to make their homes seem tasteful. They must have been rich for centuries, or something. She herself liked fine silks that flowed shiny, cut crisply. Why did Cousin Jimmy think some embassy in Tehran was so crucial? She said, 'So, they tricked you - sold you out for arms and money, while you tried to outwait them and outwit them, like a fool, and then your use of force blew up against you, and you tried at last to introduce college conscription, lost the only vote you had. But that treaty between Israel and Egypt sounds straight out of the Bible. If I were you I'd stick with that. And nobody likes poverty, and everyone likes people who build homes.' 'It depends where they do it', he corrected: 'the downside of this Inauguration is Trump Towers in Jordan Valley, less immigration, Demon Mexico, maybe torture, more even than under Obama.' But in her company the most languishing, dire anguish had a backnote of the cheerful, as if Maybelle still strummed and scratched along, self-taught on the guitar.



Jimmy Carter: Two:

Dylan Thomas

Dylan Thomas woke up in Plains, Georgia at the close-to-earth, lyrical little house of Jimmy Carter. It whispered all over with trees, country sun caressed its constant windows, where the thirty ninth President smiled like a leafy sun, himself a waiting window. As Thomas came in, 'I sang in my chains like the sea,' murmured Carter, half-haunted again by that poem. 'There's no sea here', grinned Thomas, 'And I wonder if the slaves sang in their chains here?' His own work made him nervous. America still made him nervous. College girls made him nervous, expecting you to fuck on a beer and sandwich after some breathy reading that sucked your gut out. Their terrible politeness for what Caitlin called his 'sexual autograph' made him nervous. Was that what murdered Dickens, too? He, Thomas, had made being rude to these people another art form, writhing and scratching on floors not always metaphoric when they offered some interpretation of a poem once written in seventeen drafts and now forever shut away by booze from any prospect of memory or explanation. Carter said, kindly, 'You're nervous',



helped his jacket off, explaining, 'This means very much, Mr. Thomas, to me. I have read your work in every sort of crisis, and have found it a key to staying sane, to knowing that "after the first death, there is no other", in all its hope and horror. And I did not confine the meaning, of course, to Jesus.' 'The meaning,' Thomas agreed, more softly, 'was not confined to Jesus'. Carter had opened the blue and fawn drapes and afternoon-easy breezes of Georgia honeyed in. The couch was hard and straight, the room was easy but built on firm edges. Carter poured coffee like midnight in white thin mother-china. As if in a Swansea parlour, Thomas said with courtesy: 'It's you I have to thank for that memorial to me in Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey. You suggested it on a state visit, I've been told. By Caitlin, actually, but she was sneering. We'd just had another row, of course. Can you believe that after her second marriage, she told everyone she'd never had an orgasm with me?' He heard his own voice summoning 'Cait!' down the ages, waiting for her in every lost pub and lecture hall in Christendom, until her form in all its curly sea-eyed bloneness Irished up, as enraged as if she wasn't used to him by then. Carter was prepared



for some bitterness about women from a poet, but discerned the way here was to praise and not condemn. He ventured, 'I thought her autobiography, the *Leftover Life to Kill* one, was very finely written, very vivid, indeed quite wild but brilliant in its overview of grief.' 'Its underview, you mean,' amended Thomas, but the coffee was so strong it might have been a shot of whiskey, and he remembered the death-numbness from morphine like a Welsh graveyard in a joke or funeral, like something from *The Doctor and the Devils*. When he took the medical mistake that killed him, she was watching: his American mistress, not Caitlin. He would say they were all the same, just meant for bed or kitchen, but they seemed so different to each other, and it wasn't them in either room, that he at last remembered, only their desperate voices flying, flying at him in the blackness. He said, 'At the hospital, Caitlin came in, demanding, 'Is the bloody man dead yet?' But I was, in roaring snake-tubing, and she just had to admit that she'd lost another child. She says in *Leftover Life* that she frets for me like an old cow for its calf: the thing is so badly physical. What she didn't admit in it yet, though, was that she was forced



to have an abortion to do the American visit. It was late
for one, and the child came out in pieces. When her prose
breaks up like a sky of crackers that is what comes to my mind.'

Carter poured him more coffee. He had swigged the last like spirits.
Georgia breeze played with the drapes like a bored, determined kitten.
Carter confided, 'The abortion issue is very hard for a politician.
The current President, who is not really a madman, was a liberal
about it years ago but now wants to unfund it as a program
overseas, and I suppose that might be some sort of tactical
diplomacy. Can you really help a country if you deplete its
population? I have overseen elections where the lost votes
of the poor were all that mattered.' Thomas said, 'I was a socialist.
I was also a small man with bad manners. I deplored the BBC, but
sold it *Under Milk Wood*, which Caitlin hated. The name of the town
is really 'Buggerall' spelled backwards. Do you still trust my poems,
after that?' 'With my life, as I always have', said Carter, who had known
all that, of course, already. He said, 'You should know I am a feminist. I left
the Southern Baptist Convention when they ruled out any women
as pastors, and that they should submit to their husbands. Abortion
should be unnecessary, but I upheld Roe v. Wade.' The coffee pot



was empty, and he took it to the kitchen, brought back cake. Thomas said, 'What will I read you?', as his books were on the table. 'You pick' enthused Carter, thin-eyed like a laughing infant. Thomas said, 'Nye Bevan quoted this one in *In Place of Fear*.' It was *A Refusal to Mourn* again. His voice had quickened quietness, not wasting wind as Caitlin had accused him: 'Deep with the first dead lies London's daughter, Robed in the long friends, The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother, Secret by the unmourning water Of the riding Thames...' Caitlin would spend most time with her second husband, the Italian director. But he saw that she now waited at the window, barely to be distinguished from the gold-haired light of Georgia. She had some of Carter's cake in her mouth and hand, as an Irish child, watching. He concluded, without echo, and almost without projecting:

'After the first death, there is no other,' and read until late at last with no effort. Then Jimmy Carter, delighting in the success of the visit, walked his guests to the first unguarded gate.

Diary Poem: Uses of the Appalachian Fall



What would it involve, the small apocalypse where trees
stream down autumnal like the manes of tired horses
in their sweaty or dry horse colours, every whinny
in the wind as sexual and fatal as the vocal fall
of a careless rider, or an Appalachian singer? What
would it involve, the old bones breaking over
the scarlet ground like playthings, the old songs
resurrected like staggering corpses, what would
I make of the ballet then? What would I make then
of *Appalachian Spring*, on the digitalised film
of the dance by Martha Graham, to the tunes
wrenched from life and deified by Copland? Why,
I would still fall for the levitation. The staid way
pas de deux the groom dancer and bride dancer,
as a couple of times she risks, and gravely hovers
in air like a leaf with no apparent basis, since
his hands barely brush her waist. What would it
involve, her falling, as the winsome music drops
the dancers into tragic writhing, fearing every
agony in childbirth, religion, fearing whatever ever



in the bare woods steals a lover? What would
it involve, such poverty that warps within the bone,
refines the resurrected ghosts to nothing else but
folded arms and grinning confrontation? What
would be involved if I depicted the ballet in
modified silhouette, but made her barefoot, that
rain- risen woman? What if it were the dying fall in water,
that cleans the graves from bones, what if the storm
in the singing voices fades into the mountains
like lightning exhausted? Apocalypse then the hunger's
only answer? In the songs, the lost heart and the river
burst stronger than a world's end of starvations, than
some long-avenging election. What use would be then
involved out there still in the stubborn, stillborn wild?
What songs of use fall gold for its famished creatures:
that moonless one, so far, that stole the future, or
the sunless one, so close, that stole a child?

