

JEN WATKINS

VALLEYS AND GHOSTS

I.

OUR POTATO FARM stretched across the hill above Lake Connemara. Sixty-four kilometres due north, the You Yangs rose like tors from the flatlands beyond Corio Bay. It was said, that when they appeared close and clear, it would rain within a day and, in those times, rain it did, from early autumn, through winter and until mid-spring. Days and weeks and months of deep, soaking rain, so that the paddocks sloping to my friend's house were thick and wet with tussocks of green grass. The paddocks turned yellow with cape weed daisies in the spring and the cream, produced by the cattle that grazed there, carried the sour taste of it.

The Barwon River flowed from the west, swelled over the marshlands of the valley to form the lake and narrowed again as it made its way south to the Heads and Bass Strait. From our verandah, it looked like a python, full from a big lunch, lying fat and snoozing in the sun. Its belly would shrink in the summer months, exposing reeds between the cracks in the lake bed, while the surrounding paddocks baked hard and brown.

My friend once said to me, 'We have all we will ever need right here.' Staring westward under a bright moon, I believed him. A sea mist crept across the lake and somewhere in the deep silence, came a sound like a cry underwater.

Ours was a rambling home of slamming doors, songs sung around the piano and arguments pounded out on the kitchen table. It was strange to live teetering on the edge of worlds as we did. Not one of us had a mild view of things. We were too brave to have been worn down by the ordinary and the small, and too young to believe life could be any other way.

2.

Da was a Welshman who lived and dreamed the stories of his people. His eyes, the colour of Welsh slate, would burn blue when a story was upon him. Placing the salt and pepper shakers in line with the sugar bowl and the sauce bottles, he'd shape his words across the tablecloth and drop the pitch of his voice. We'd lean in close and, together with his shipmates, chase a Japanese sub across the China Seas, or meet with a blind Sikh fortune teller in Delhi, or swish a pan in the gravel of a stream and find nuggets as big as marbles.

Ghost stories were our favourites.

'Now Cliff,' warned our Mum, 'you're filling their heads with nonsense.'

The ghosts, who drifted up the hill in the salt of the lake and moved silently through the walls of our house, invited in by Da's story, were powerless against Mum's towering practicality. We were glad of it. They crowded in the dark just beyond the warmth of our kitchen, while we followed the lilt in Da's voice, back through the years to the faraway valley of Dan-y-Chapel.

During summer, Mother would sit outside the open kitchen door, peeling potatoes for the evening meal.

'A sunny spot, tucked into the crook of the mountain's arm,' she would say.

Mother enjoyed the soft breeze as it rose from the valley and stirred along the rise, through the orchard, to the dairy.

One afternoon as she worked, the wind lifted and changed direction. Mother drew her shawl in close. It was then that she saw her—a young girl, stumbling between the rows of trees.

'Hellooo!' Mother called into the wind.

The girl made no sign and struggled on toward the dairy, disappearing through its door.

3.

Mother jumped to her feet and threw off her shawl and the potatoes spilled and rolled into the garden.

She gathered her skirts and ran up through the trees. On reaching the cow pens, she leaned against a rail and gulped for breath.

The wind fell away and the mountain, again, stood quiet.

The dairy was empty.

'Left to my own thoughts for too long.' She was fond of saying with each telling of the

story. And she would laugh and pretend a foolishness that was not hers.

But there was a part to it that she did not always share:

When she returned down the mountain to the house, she stopped at the gate and stood frozen to the spot. The shawl, which she had thrown off, was folded on her chair, and the potatoes had been gathered from the garden and stacked neatly by the door.

She did not tell everyone this part, because that is the way with stories—you must measure a person's knowing.

She did not tell everyone; but she did tell me.

Over two decades have passed since we returned Da's ashes to the sea that carried him here. Heather grown and picked on the mountain side above Dan-y-Capel floated on the surface by the boat. We sang 'Cwm Rhondda' to the depths of Corio Bay and peered at the horizon. The You Yangs looked to be very close.

4.

Mum has seen Da once since then. He came bustling into the bedroom, 'Back from a meeting,' he said. They spoke for a time and then he was gone. The next day, Mum donated all his clothes to the Salvation Army and burned all the letters of their courtship.

My friend is gone too. Perhaps there is mercy in that he cannot see what has become of our paddocks and the lake. Tarmac and curb and channel press down on the thick grass, and the moon is trapped between colour bond roof tops and a rising forest of TV antennas. The paddocks where we would lie back and breathe salty dreams; the chuckle in Da's blue eyes; the raucous arguments and slamming doors; the songs sung; the ghosts who crept into our house to listen to stories about themselves, are all gone.

When Mum sold the house and was packing her life into boxes, deciding what to keep and what to throw away, I asked her if we could have one more big, family nosh up, where we could eat, drink, argue too much, sing songs around the piano and rub shoulders with those both living and dead.

'We must say goodbye to the ghosts, Mum.'

'Yes,' she said, 'yes. We must.'