



If you were to stand at the window in Hewlands and crane your neck sideways, it would be possible to see the edge of the forest.

You might find it a restless, verdant, inconstant sight: the wind caresses, ruffles, disturbs the mass of leaves; each tree answers to the weather's ministrations at a slightly different tempo from its neighbour, bending and shuddering and tossing its branches, as if trying to get away from the air, from the very soil that nourishes it.

On a morning in early spring, fifteen years or so before Hamnet runs to the house of the physician, a Latin tutor is standing in this place at the window, absently tugging on the hoop through his left ear. He is watching the trees. Their collective presence, lined up as they are, fringing the edge of the farm, brings to his mind the backdrop of a theatre, the kind of painted trickery that is unrolled, quickly, into place to let the audience know they are now in a sylvan setting, that the city or streets of the previous scene are gone, that they are now on wooded, uncultivated, perhaps unstable ground.

A slight frown appears on his face. He remains at the window, the fingertips of one hand pressed white to the glass. The boys are behind him; they are conjugating verbs, temporarily unheard by the tutor, who is intent on the startling contrast between the sharply blue spring sky and the new-leaf green of the forest. The colours seem to fight, vying for supremacy, vibrancy: the green versus the blue, one against the other. The children's Latin verbs wash over him, through

him, like the wind through the trees. Somewhere in the farmhouse a bell is rung, first briefly and then more insistently. There are footfalls along the passage, the sound of a door banging into its frame. One of the boys – the younger one, James, the tutor knows, without turning – sighs, coughs, clears his throat, then rejoins the intoning. The tutor readjusts his collar, smooths his hair.

The Latin verbs roll on and on, around him, like a fenland fog, through his feet, up and over his shoulders, past his ears, to seep out of the cracks in the window lead. He allows the chanted words to merge into an aural blur that fills the room, right to its high, blackened rafters. It collects up there, along with the curls and veils of smoke from the chimneyless fire that smoulders in the grate. He has instructed the boys to conjugate the verb 'incarcerare': the repeated hard *c* sound seems to scrape at the walls of the room, as if the very words themselves are seeking escape.

The tutor is forced to come here twice a week by his father, the glover, who is in some manner of debt to Hewlands, after the souring of an agreement or deal with the yeoman who used to own the farm. The yeoman had been a broad-backed man who carried through his belt a sheep-hook shaped like a cudgel, and there was something about his open, candid face that the tutor had rather liked. But the yeoman had died suddenly last year, leaving all his acres and flocks, along with a wife and eight or nine children (the tutor is unsure exactly how many). It was an event his own father had greeted with barely concealed glee. Only he knew of the nature of the loan: the tutor had overheard his father crowing, late at night, when he thought no one could overhear (the tutor is very good at

clandestine listening): Don't you see? The widow will not know or, if she does, will not dare to come and ask me to make good on it, or that overgrown dullard of an eldest son.

It appears, however, that the widow or son has done just that and this arrangement (the tutor has gleaned, from listening in to conversations going on behind the door of his parents' chamber) is something to do with what his father did with a consignment of the yeoman's sheepskins. His father had told the yeoman that the hides were to be sent for whit-tawing and the yeoman had believed him. But then his father had insisted that the wool should be left on, which had aroused the suspicion of the yeoman, which for some reason has caused all this trouble. The tutor is unclear on this last point as his mother was called away from the whispered conversation by the querulous, creaking cry of Edmond, her youngest child.

The tutor's glover father has some new, slightly illicit venture that none of them are supposed to know about: this much the tutor can tell. They were to make out, their parents told them, to anyone who asked, that the sheepskins were for gloves. He and his siblings had been baffled as it had not occurred to them that the skins were for anything other than gloves. Whatever else could his father, the most successful glover in town, possibly want them for?

There is a debt or a fine and their father cannot – will not? – pay, and the yeoman's widow or son will not let it drop so it appears that he himself is the payment. His time, his Latin grammar, his brain. Twice a week, his father told him, he must walk the mile or so out of town, along the stream, to this low-lying hall, surrounded by sheep, where he must run the younger boys through their lessons.

He had had no warning of this plan, this web being spun around him. His father had called him into the workshop one evening, as the household was preparing for bed, to tell him that he was to go to Hewlands to 'start drumming some education into the boys there'. The tutor had stood in the doorway and stared hard at his father. When, he asked, was this arranged? His father and mother had been wiping and polishing the tools in preparation for the next day. Doesn't concern you, his father said. All you need to know is that you are going. What, the son replied, if I don't care to? The father fitted a long knife back into its leather sleeve, seemingly without hearing this response. His mother had glanced at her husband, then at her son, giving him a minute shake of her head. You'll go, his father said eventually, laying down his rag, and there's an end to it.

The desire to push himself away from these two people, to stride out of the room, to wrench open the front door and run into the street rose in the son, like sap in a tree. And, yes, to strike his father, to do some harm to that body, to take his own fists and arms and fingers and give back to this man all that had been dealt to him. They had, all six of them, from time to time, received the blows and grips and slaps that resulted from the father's temper, but with nothing like the regularity and brutality of this eldest son. He didn't know why but something about him had always drawn his father's anger and frustration to him, like a horseshoe to a magnet. He carried within him, always, the sensation of his father's calloused hand enclosing the soft skin of his upper arm, the inescapable grip that kept him there so his father could rain down blows with his other, stronger, hand. The shock of a

slap landing, sudden and sharp, from above; the flensing sting of a wooden instrument on the back of the legs. How hard were the bones in the hand of an adult, how tender and soft the flesh of a child, how easy to bend and strain those young, unfinished bones. The doused, drenched feeling of fury, of impotent humiliation, in the long minutes of a beating.

His father's rages arrived from nowhere, like a gale, then blew quickly on. There was no pattern, no warning, no rationale; it was never the same thing twice that tipped him over. The son learnt, at a young age, to sense the onset of these eruptions and a series of feints and dodges to avoid his father's fists. As an astronomer reads the minuscule shifts and alterations in the alignment of the planets and spheres, to see what lies in store, this eldest son became an expert in reading his father's moods and expressions. He could tell, from the sound the front door made when his father entered from the street, from the rhythm of his footsteps on the flagstones, whether or not he was in for a beating. A spilt ladle of water, a boot left in the wrong place on the floor, a facial expression deemed insufficiently respectful – any of these might be the excuse the father sought.

In the last year or so, the son has grown tall, taller than the father: he is stronger, younger, faster. His walks to various local markets, to outlying farms, to and from the tannery, with sacks of skins or finished gloves on his back, have brought muscle and weight to his shoulders and neck. It has not eluded the son's notice that his father's blows have, of late, tailed off. There was a moment, several months ago, when the father came out of his workshop late in the evening and, finding the son in the passageway, without a word, bore down on him

and, lifting the wineskin he was holding, lashed the son about the face. The pain was of the stinging sort, not aching, not bruising, not pressing: it had a sharp, whipped, lacerating quality. There would, the son knew, be a red, broken mark on his face. The sight of the mark seemed to enrage the father further because he lifted his arm again, for a second blow, but the son reached up. He seized his father's arm. He pushed, with all his might, against him and found, to his surprise, that his father's body yielded under his. He could push this man, this leviathan, this monster of his childhood, back against the wall with very little effort. He did so. He kept his father there with the point of his elbow. He shook his father's arm, like that of a puppet, and the wineskin dropped to the floor. He leant his face into his, noticing at the same time that he was looking down on him. That, he said to him, is the last time you will ever hit me.

As he stands at Hewlands' window, the need to leave, to rebel, to escape is so great it fills him to his very outer edge: he can eat nothing from the plate the farmer's widow left for him, so crammed is he with the urge to leave, to get away, to move his feet and legs to some other place, as far away from here as he can manage.

The Latin rolls on, the verbs coming around again, from pluperfect tense to present. He is just about to turn and face his pupils when he sees, from the trees, a figure emerge.

For a moment, the tutor believes it to be a young man. He is wearing a cap, a leather jerkin, gauntlets; he moves out of the trees with a brand of masculine insouciance or entitlement, covering the ground with booted strides. There is some kind of bird on his outstretched fist: chestnut-brown with a creamy

and devastation wait for you around corners, inside coffers, behind doors: they can leap out at you at any moment, like a thief or brigand. The trick is never to let down your guard. Never think you are safe. Never take for granted that your children's hearts beat, that they sup milk, that they draw breath, that they walk and speak and smile and argue and play. Never for a moment forget they may be gone, snatched from you, in the blink of an eye, borne away from you like thistledown.

Mary feels tears gathering in her eyes, feels her throat closing over. The sight of Judith's hair, still plaited, the line of her jaw and neck. How can it be that she will no longer exist? That, before too long, she and Agnes will be washing this body, combing out that plait, readying her for burial? Mary turns briskly, taking up a pitcher, a cloth, a plate, anything, moving them to the table and back again.

Eliza, who is seated at the table, her chin in her hand, whispers, 'I should write. Don't you think so, Mamma?'

Mary glances at the pallet, where Agnes has her head bowed, almost as if in prayer. All day, Agnes has refused to let Eliza write to Judith's father. All will be well, she has kept saying, as she ground up herbs, with increasingly frantic movements, as she tried to get Judith to swallow tinctures and tisanes, as she rubbed ointments into her skin. We mustn't alarm him. It is not necessary.

Mary turns back to Eliza and gives her a quick, single nod. She watches as Eliza goes to a cupboard and takes out ink, paper and quill; her brother keeps them there for when he is at home. She sits down at the table and dips her quill into the ink and, hesitating for just a moment, writes.

Dear Brother,

I am sorrie to tel you that Judith, your daughter, is verie sick. We belief she has not manie hours left to her. Plea^s come bak to us, if you can. And make hast.

God ^speed to you, dearest brother.

Your loving sister,

Eliza

Mary melts the sealing-wax over a candle; she sees Agnes watching as they drip it on to the folded page. Eliza writes the address of her brother's lodgings on the front, then Mary takes up the letter and goes next door with it, to her own house. She will find a coin, open a window, call to whoever is in the street to take it to the inn on the road out of Stratford and ask the innkeeper to convey it, fast as he can, to London, to her son.

Not long after Mary leaves to find a coin, to hail a passer-by, Hamnet drifts to the surface of sleep. He lies for a while under the sheet, wondering why nothing feels right, why the world feels as though it has slanted slightly, why he feels so dry of mouth, so heavy of heart, so sore in the head.

He looks one way in the dark room and sees his parents' bed: empty. He looks the other and sees the pallet where his sisters sleep. Only one body is under the covers and then he remembers: Judith is sick. How could he have forgotten?

He lurches upright, pulling the bedclothes with him, and makes two discoveries. His head is filled with pain, like a bowl brimful of scalding water. It is a strange, confusing kind of pain – it drives out all thought, all sense of action. It saturates his head, spreading itself to the muscles and focus of his eyes;