

ARES AND APHRODITE

A Modern Greek Myth

This is the myth of a God who needed complete control. He was no bull, no overt aggressor but required dominance of decision to cover his low self-esteem. Because he became seized up with fear at the thought, or actuality, of any transfer of that security he had strapped wings onto his feet.

On his ankles to be precise. He became Ares the strong God of flight, as well as fight, or mercurial as he fled with such unbelievable speed. To help each escape, which became apparent more and more often, he developed not only the wings on his ankles but grew some strong ones on each side of his head, just above his ears. Neither of these pairs of wings had been made of feathers. No, they were made of strong metal formed by Hephaestus in his fierce fire shed. Yet Hephaestus, having endured Aphrodite's infidelity with Ares, decided to play a trick on the War God. He lured him into his forge on the pretext of making metal wings of escape for Ares, who agreed to pay for them. Little did that God realise the deception his lovely Aphrodite would make to punish both him and her husband Hephaestus for the humiliation of being caught by a net in bed with Ares so that mortals could see them lying together.

When heated red and then white in those raging flames from the coals, the wings were flourished by Hephaestus, then held high, dipped quickly in a vat of cold water to sizzle, clean and refine into purity. With the rumbling incantations of the forge master, miraculously those lumps of copper and other metals had transformed into two wings with the imprint of natural feathers beaten to the outsides of their shapes. Out they came, perfect from the fire.

Ares was standing back, a little away and to the side of Hephaestus, watching every movement of his skill and envying the dexterity of each twist of the holding rod. For once he was not in control, and did not wish to be. But this was different. This was man's companionship with man; no amorous rivalry, just admiration for his skill. Ares was a very tall fine looking man well formed as though carved by a sculptor who had especially chosen them from a row of aspiring models. He was well aware of his attributes and confident of their conquering power. Not so Hephaestus who was born crippled and ugly.

But this was not the point. Hephaestus finished his labour, the forge fire had died down into still warm unused embers and Ares held out his hands to receive the now cool wings. He thanked

and paid Hephaestus who then asked him to sit on a bench and strap a wing onto each heel. He then took up the other pair of wings and soldered them to the side of the metal helmet that Ares was wearing. With his armour plating and leg guards this God knew only too well that he was the finest to compete with, or without challenge, any other God. Having embraced, clasped hands, and also having wished him 'God's speed' Hephaestus turned back into his shed to continue his work.

Ares was alone, and higher up on an outcrop beyond where Hephaestus had made his domain of fire underground. He, the travelling God, looked out over an amazing wide panorama that stretched over many miles of southern Greece: the Peloponnese. The sun was high in the sky. It was past noon and the midday heat sizzled in waves of haze over the lower mountain and especially into the valleys below. Ares looked around him as he spread out his arms, those human wings ready to fly. The wind caught him across his torso and into his armpits, urging him to lift off, set out and away. But he was not ready. He lowered his arms again and turned his back on distance and the cliff leap in front of him.

Where should he go? Who should he see? It was only a few moments, a flip of his wings, a blink of his eyes before a most beautiful and tempting goddess came into his mind's sight. This was Aphrodite the sensual one who could not keep her distance and found no difficulty in persuading him from within his heart rather than flaunting her beauty more obviously at him. She did not want separation; she was no flirt but just aware of her gentle power over the male gods.

Ares swivelled back on his feet, the ankle wings widened and the God walked to the edge of the cliff. He was almost sure where he would find Aphrodite, but he was not sure if she would be alone: she held court to many other aspiring Gods. Yet now Ares most jealously wished her to receive him alone. Raising his feet on their tips he poised, waiting for his head wings to expand to hold him forward with the increasing wind. When those wings filled he raised his arms which loosened his cloak but also began to carry him into a warm thermal uplift. He bent his knees, leaned forward and jumped.

Soon he was soaring. Every limb and particle of his body seemed buoyant with air which made him fly with the least effort and most powerful speed. He raised his head to left and to right, turning his head wings like rudders into the wind. Where would she be, his Aphrodite? He hoped, but he had to become more skilful than that. Although she was a goddess he had to approach her on a more earthly level. He decided to land in an oak bower of saplings where he took off his helmet with those wings, undid the buckles of his breastplate and unstrapped the wings from his sandals. He carried all the wings in his left hand and progressed forward. Now he prided himself on being a more earthly man-God who would not frighten his favourite Goddess into retreat. The sun was still warm although its light had become golden in the late afternoon. It shone on his thick wavy hair and made it gleam a flattering bronze.

In less than no time Ares stood above Aphrodite with the sunlight silhouetting his form in pure gold. Aphrodite did not look up; she knew what he looked like, knew it was him anyway and would not be caught on his terms. So she pretended to be unaware, stretched out her perfect naked form on the soft grass she was gracing. She stifled a yawn and looked into distance away from her obvious lover. Ares waited, but his patience soon gave out. After all he was a God of War and action, ready to stamp a foot, command those around him and expect to be obeyed immediately. This time though he was not in total command of himself. Slowly, and with deep intended purpose Aphrodite revolved right round to face him. Her face, her neck, her breasts and all her other perfect parts were displayed in this golden light as though she was unaware of their tantalising beauty. She raised her face to look languidly into his eyes.

'Oh, so it's *you* ' she declared, looking down and away.

'Yes it's *me*. Of course it is! *You can see it is!*'

Aphrodite did not answer. Her pause shot an agony of suspense into Ares. At last he knelt down beside her and she stole him a glance.

'Yes of course... *Of course it's me!* I've come for you my beautiful goddess, *don't you want me?* Without waiting for her reply he added 'Of course you do, I can see the lustre, the silver brilliance in your eyes that beckons me to come to you *now!*'

Aphrodite looked down again. 'No I can't. There is no lustre except the reflection in my tears ready to flow. Where have you been that has taken you so long and so far away?'

Now she looked up and, sure enough, Ares could detect tears in her eyes and, yes, they were ready to flow. He did not answer her question but, kneeling further forward, held out his arms for her response. Aphrodite was not sure that she trusted him, and did not want to hear any tales of adventures and wanderings that she could not be sure were true. All too soon an excitement, this uncontrollable welling came up through her whole body to tell her that her resistance to her lover was rapidly weakening. Her giving and forgiving nature made her glow, and of course Ares could feel its increase as he continued to hold her arms down firmly in his.

He needed no more persuasion. Now so close to his vibrant, shivering lover, he moved his arms right round her in an all enfolding, captive embrace. He held her without looking or speaking to her until she calmed and the trembling ceased. There was no need for words between them. Ares let out a slow whistle to which Aphrodite responded with a faint sigh. She lay back, unleashing his arms as she did so, and placing each one of his hands on each one of her breasts. Their fire was ignited, the flames danced, as Ares climbed over her prone body with the swiftness of a hawk leaping onto its prey.

But this was no violence from the warrior God. His speed was all tenderness and gift that he now demanded from his lover in equal measure. She gave him even more. So a new God was created just as the sun began to set into the blood red glory of the Aegean Sea. The violent sky moved into a silent mauve dusk and the sun settled down quickly to sleep over the far horizon. There was no need to guard the lovers; they had fulfilled their godly purpose. As they turned away from each other, having satisfied all godly and earthly passions of encounter, seduction, and love, Ares noticed Aphrodite reclining beside him with a curious smile on her face. He asked her the meaning of it and drew her back towards him.

'Why that smile, is it pure content?'

'Well...!' Aphrodite hesitated 'Well...not only....' And Ares again noticed that she looked scheming; not wicked but triumphant.

'Well not only, my dear God. But now, for now do you realise that I have captured you because you had taken off your wings to make love to me. I am lying on them, you cannot get at them, and even more - you cannot fly away and leave me!'

Never was a man-God so fallen, so caught by such an easy guise. A look of defeated dismay filled his whole face. Aphrodite laughed up at him in sheer powerful control. At last their roles had changed into reverse. She had made Ares powerless by her skilful action. Soon, being the gentle goddess that she was and always guided by love, she felt secure and moved up closer, even nearer to the warmth of his side. She could not resist and lifted up her face to receive further kisses from him. As he could not get away until she gave him back his precious freedom with his wings, he acquiesced and enjoyed her until morning. And she fully responded!

Yet that was not the end of the tale. While Aphrodite was sleeping the sleep of the just and giving, Ares had woken early. Sleep did not come easily to him: his rest was the restlessness of the less just and only temporary good. He leaned on one elbow and gazed at his precious love and knew that he would not keep her; he could not want to. Gently and quietly he eased her over onto her side with her back towards him so that he would not wake her. Soon his rather flattened wings came into view. Now with both hands, that had so recently and tenderly held one on each of her breasts, he reached to hold his wings instead. That metal was cold but powerful and fed his excitement differently. These two wings for his helmet came out crumpled but unharmed. He withdrew the other two and sat away to fix them back on his sandals that he had replaced on his feet.

Leaning over the no longer his but still soundly sleeping Aphrodite, Ares brushed a kiss on to her forehead and then her lips. She shivered a tremor of reminiscent ecstasy towards him. Quickly he took his leave, stroking her hair briefly as he dashed out into the dawn. In no time he was soaring up in the air: up and up, higher and higher until he was a speck, a minuscule man-God disappearing into freedom. For him Aphrodite soon became a dream of the earth. For her, well she was a woman and knew all about abandon. Loss was certainly hers, but hers too was the richness of all that giving leading into gain.

OLD RUSHFORTH

The old Welsh shepherd was sitting in a rocking chair huddled closely and hugging to himself the fire's warmth. The blaze acted as artificial resuscitation to his thin old blood, and the dancing flames brought life into his wrinkled face. He swung back and forth champing his false teeth in his gum-recessed mouth.

'Ho, ho, we-ell now... This mornin'... Aah... did I now? Ten acre field... That's good for a man of my age... Aya.'

On he rambled, no-one really listening, yet everyone aware of his presence. He clunked his mouth together and beetled his brow. The only part of his old head still luxuriant was his eyebrows. With flourish they rambled, intertwining green, grey and red whiskers moving with

more expression of their own than the rest of his face. Astonishment, reflected joy and sadness variously shaped their position. His eyes sunk deep into their sockets as small milky glints just like two opals thrown into watery pits. They shone like sunlight dancing in cracked ice puddles, yet reflecting his final resignation.

His chair stopped rocking: he gazed into the embers, continued talking. He reminisced about poaching, gamekeeping and shepherding, doffing his cap to a lifetime of service to aristocratic households, in what could have been called 'healthy respect' had it not been for his blatant exploitation of simplicity in the field stock of human beings.

But he did not mind, he was happy: he was grateful for his long life on the hills. Such beauty, that to travel elsewhere could only have enhanced the memory of these rounded hills, bracken shining under the summer sky and smells returning the nostalgia of recall. Certainly not for the aridity of fascinating a Biblical Land, anyway he had never been prepared to try it. He had the fertility of Welsh poetry and legend right here with whistling reverberating from one hill to another of a shepherd calling to his flock.

The cool cry of a curlew as it flapped down the valley and over the reservoirs, its caressing call leading up onto the moor, to rest in tussocks of grass with the skylarks. The cuckoo's warning, that strange bird's fleeting visit, lonely and yet a herald of warmth. An aura ringed new green hawthorn buds; making cheese for yellowhammers. Then a border of cherry trees, wild geese climbed up along the footpath below start to the mountain summit. No real mountain to be seen from here, just hills motherly undulating, protecting wild life in the long-haired bracken growth.

In mid winter the old man had been seen digging the cabbage patch in the frosty air, chuckling at his escape from the women, when his two daughters were out and unable to stop him. It would have been too cold for a normal man let alone one aged more than ninety years. On another occasion we had admired his prowess in still being able to shepherd his sheep. A younger shepherd had laughed ironically and said,

'Yes, he shepherds his sheep all right, and those of everybody else - but he moved them all into the wrong field! I wish he would use his own fields, the old bugger!'

Anyway the old man settled himself again, his knarled hands resting over his knobby old legs. A look of pain came over his face.

'Aaaah... me knees. Can't complain but it's me knees now.'

He smiled across at his daughter, a walking abnegation of life devoted to caring for the old man. She was obviously a generation younger but her back was bent double his from carrying water from the spring half a mile up the track. Winters of chilblains had bilberry coloured her face and twisted her hands, yet there was no acrimony of expression. As she once remarked after a tale of woe while reminiscing her lack of love interest to us.

'Dear, dear - well I don't go in for that sort of thing, so I don't worry. Happier that way. Just the cows and the chickens, they take up all my time. They need quite a lot of looking after, you know. And then of course there's father - he's doing very well for his age, bless him.' What tyranny had he exerted in his younger days to keep her so willingly beside him? Perhaps his sense of humour must have been worth part of her sacrifice?

Spasky, the close-furred Persian cat sitting on the old man's knees; stirred and yawned. As she did so, so did the old fellow. Characters of selfishness, they both displayed their fangs. Hers were an abnormal outgrowth of sabre teeth, unclipped and rather yellow, his were holding a precarious false grip in place of his natural ones, long decayed. They both shut their mouths and eyes together and reduced themselves down in the chair to sleep. Outside, Bronwen the hill sheepdog, young 'white-fronted', spun on her lead and danced round the kennel, throwing up bare trodden dust and barking enthusiastic welcome as danger for anyone coming near.

The old man opened one eye and saw us enter. A little maudlin from sleep, an aged crocodile tear filled the duct and his nose began to drip. He pulled out a stagnant handkerchief, blew loudly into it, and lifted up his brimming eyes while holding out his death-cold fingers towards us, shaking his head with comprehensible self-pity for a man of his years. He held onto our young hands, gripping them into his bones.

'Aye, aye, not so good at present. De' ye know? I dunno, but I feel I'm one foot in the grave - and one out!' We could not dispute his age so instead we told him how lucky he was to live in the hills. He nodded, already absent-mindedly lacking interest and slipping into far senile dreams.

We left him later. Somehow he had stumbled over the rough ground, sneaking out while his daughters vigilant eyes were diverted elsewhere. His stooped old back, his bow legs in leather shield gaiters and his worn corduroys showed him tall but bent. He was standing there admiring his white Aylesbury ducks. Did he see beauty in the bird or a plucked dinner? He tottered and nearly fell, but recovered his balance and was finally rescued by his admonishing womenfolk. Like a child, he was proud of his escape and chortled with glee as he was firmly led back into the kitchen.

All the same he was right. He died a few weeks later from an old age fall, by mistake pulling a wardrobe over onto him like a coffin. But he was still within sight of the mountain.

First Communion.

One sharp evening, after all the presents had been opened and the carols sung by the flickering candlelight of the Christmas tree, one of the sisters walked across the fields to the village church.

It was Christmas Eve and the round apse of the nave seemed to fit into the hump of the hill and the lighted windows encouraged the villagers to hurry to the warmth of communion.

From the starlit night and sharp frosty air and into the atmosphere of snug humanity, with a small organ thundering 'Once upon a midnight clear.'

The girl sat quietly between the villagers absorbing a slight feeling of personal ostracism, because she had left home the previous year and in any case had never been an active member of the village group: A welcome face was that of the verger, as capable and handsome in his black gown as he was on weekdays in his gardening breeches and leg guards. Her was a peaceful, pious man at home with God and earth, birds and beings. She watched him silently floating back and forth beside the altar and the communion rail.

The organ music died in to a background sound and as the community knelt, the pews emptied and the villagers walked up the aisle to kneel by the rail. The girl sat there and watched, and then by an impulse joined the others. She had not been confirmed and so there was a sort of hesitant guilt in her action in case anyone disclosed that she was not a branded member of the church. She was sure the gardener knew, anyway. She knelt like the others and waited for the sacrificial cup to approach. She heard the blessing given to her neighbour, the sip of wine and the cloth passed over the rim of the vessel. Now it was her turn and the cup offered and the calm voice quietly intoned. The gardener followed with the plate of wafers. She was not sure what to do, and did not put the biscuit in her mouth but hid it in her pocket. The vicar and the verger moved on and a moment later

The service continued brightly. The church was decorated with holly and fir in all the aisles and a white candle shone in the alcove of each lancet window. The altar was cheerful with its huge candles and a Christmas tree to one side. It gave an aura of joyful festivity and the atmosphere of added rejoicing came over in the lusty singing of the closing carols. Her hands were warm in her pocket, one on the coins and the other over the round wafer.

The congregation drifted out, there were greetings from the churchmen at the door and the villagers dispersed. She walked alone along the road for a short way, passed the shops and garage, and then up some steps cut out of the steep hill which led towards the village school.

The stars were frosty bright with the twinkle that only seems to come when the temperature is winter low. She went by the school playing field, passed the swings and then stopped. In the light of the moon she drew out the wafer and looked at it. She had never seen one close at hand. She held it up to the moonlight and to her surprise it looked like any sort of cheese biscuit, but smaller and more colourless. She ate it and it tasted equally insipid. Although she tried to imagine it blessed and special, the symbolic Body of Christ and a reminder of the remission of sins, it held no miracle for her. Maybe out of the community context it had lost its flavour. It seemed to be a pale, ordinary wafer and the equally pale moon was far more mysterious and compelling.

So she walked on, her hands in the pockets now empty of redeeming Body and monetary offering, but her thoughts were soothed by the contemplation of the moon's existence. The exclusion she felt from the communion circle was amply compensated by its radiance and the night clouds.

THE FAUN AND THE GODDESS.

A Pastoral Sympathy

One day in early autumn the park was nearly empty. It was midday and warm. From a distance the green undulating space had been well planned. Various pines and deciduous trees were strategically placed for paths to wind in between them. The leaves were turning golden but not all of them had fallen and the dark green pines remained. Blue sky and plump clouds topped their colours, and sunlit birds dipped and rose in flight. In a dell far off was a tiny white speck: it did not move. A few people wandered up to it, then away - and yet there it was.

A faun was taking his lunchtime stroll. He chose that hour on purpose to be alone: he hated crowds and local people who might accost him with news of their progress - not his! Patience with patients; none at this time of day, thank God. He walked towards the white dot with whom he was well acquainted in a very special way. Anyone could have seen that it was the sculpture of a young woman, a goddess naked on a pedestal. She was not flamboyant but carved with the rare smoothness of eighteenth century purity, nearly a monochrome in alabaster. On the plinth her feet casually rested on an open book and above, her head was raised a little which made her seem to follow the journeying of some birds.

He was a fine looking faun, a bit beyond youth in the sense of years but now in the sort of prime that defied time by having found solutions - to some things! He had learned to accept himself with humour, or so it seemed to outsiders. Only he knew his own internal pain. Not true, other people did too, he made sure of that. To hell with it! There was hot sun and he was out for fun to enjoy some taunting: a strange way to love, but it was his.

Soon he was alongside the pedestal of the Goddess, and pre-occupied with re-reading for the hundredth time the inscription someone had put on the base of her pillar about 'pride coming before a fall'. What would happen now? Each time he looked up adoringly, the Goddess seemed to topple a little, or perhaps she just pretended to he thought as he scowled through his smiles. It would need more than guile to get her down off that perch. He whistled like a mating bird and for a moment she tilted her head tentatively on one side to listen, then held herself aloof and away.

'Damn that chick!'

The Faun walked off, his hands behind his back, pretending to ponder. Only once did he allow himself to glance over his shoulder and - did he catch her wistfully looking back at him?

He hummed to himself, thinking about their next encounter; capture with words? He knew her weakness, it was warmth and words, he knew that and she loved him in spite of his caprices.

The Goddess thought she would try again and when she caught sight of the Faun strutting round the park, looking at his hooves and then into distance, up at the sky and then inadvertently at her, she climbed down, followed him and slipped her arm under his. Soon he turned and beamed at her - and the sun shone.

‘Hello love, have you been waiting long?’ The Faun had squeezed her carving into flesh again! With ease he could warm her alabaster until it glowed rose pink: his way of turning her into a sort of painting. She could have kicked his hocks, but admired his 'savoir faire'. It showed in his eyes, they sparkled.

‘You haven't got the rain out of your crevices yet!’

The Faun wiped them with the back of his hand. Did the Goddess see his tail wagging in expectation? What did he do while she was huffed up there and he disappeared into distance? She asked him.

‘I'm too old and tired these days...’

She leaped back. Convincing, but was it true? There was always a new escapade, a party or fresh acquaintance on his arm, yet he didn't keep her at arm's length.

‘Don't be bloody stu-pid. I can't tell you every day that I'm true, or every hour that I'm faithful; you must just believe me.’

The Goddess turned her back, so the Faun began to grumble at her.

‘I always get women like you, pedestal types, sensitive natured – and I can't live up to them.’ He paused, ‘I can't even reach you!’

‘Oh. Shall I come down again then?’

‘Yes please, just for a minute or two - but leave your bloody book up there.’

Her book was too much for him. Close to where her feet had been resting on it, she now jumped down. As he did not try to catch her, she dropped into the leaves piled at the foot of the pillar. She wiped them from her face and they floated round, then settled on earth again. That smelled delicious. He raised her up and they laughed. He drew the edge of his hand firmly up her spine, which made her wriggle with pleasure. So much so that he threw her onto the grass, not even looking to see if the park was empty. But they were alone, and she felt his warm fur against her legs.

‘Move your hooves, they're too hard.’

‘Shut up woman.’

The Faun closed her mouth with a kiss. They lay on the ground. The sun lowered and it was cooler. Even that common land had beauty in tall birches, soft turf; his hands - him. She held his horns and smoothed his hair, teased his ears.

‘Got you!’

‘Not for long - I don't really want you.’

‘True?’

‘Not true - I do.’

A couple walked by and some dogs came over, inquisitive sniffing and then retreat. You don't often see a faun and a goddess relaxing in a suburban park. Would the Queen have minded the Faun wondered, or did she only worry about Royal Parks, not lesser ones like this? He was anti-royalist anyway and would happily have pounced just to show any of the Queen's minions who happened to be around, who he was. Even a faun can be a king when he's not trying too hard, the Goddess thought. The Faun was now dozing. Then he woke up, instantly upright.

‘Come on, let's go. That was a great sleep - I feel fine now.’

He was unaware that she hadn't slept and wasn't at all fine, but he was already half way across the common.

‘Wait for me.’

‘I can't and I won't. I must get back. Don't drag your pedestal, just use your legs.’ He paused and speculated over his shoulder to her. ‘I can write what I feel in about eight letters - after that it's all repetition.’

Cruel cold was returning, so the Goddess retaliated,

‘I feel different every morning - even towards you!’

The Faun sensed her distance, and was suddenly offended.

‘You would on that stand of yours.’ Needing sympathy he repeated, ‘I get so tired these days.’

‘No you don't.’

‘You don't know, wouldn't understand - perhaps don't even *care?*’

‘Come *on*, love.’

The Goddess held him again and they walked on. There was no more to say - then.

Another time the Faun was half boasting, half serious, but now decided to mock the Goddess from the ground.

‘You're too grand up there. It's no use giving yourself airs. Neither of us will succeed because if we were to have done so it would have happened by now. It isn't that you're bad, not good as a person I mean, you are - and me perhaps?’

The Goddess was hurt. While the Faun looked at his feet, he added more kindly,

‘No, I don't mean that. But none of us, anywhere, can get on in this philistine world and whatever we think, they are not going to take the slightest bit of notice of us. It doesn't matter if its bombs or birds, books or bricks, the people up there at the top holding all that megalomaniac power... Oh *shit!*’

As he stormed and ranted, the Faun had stepped in a puddle. The Goddess laughed,

‘You need wellies if you're going to march through muck!’

‘It's not funny.’

‘Oh yes it *is!*’

The Faun sat on a tussock and took off his shoes to see if his hooves were dirty: the mud was seeping into his fur.

‘Can I come down again?’

Without waiting for a reply the Goddess slid down the pillar. She gently ruffled his hair backwards. The Faun revelled in her preening and soon became calmer. She offered,

‘You may have my pedestal if you like, for your speeches. Willingly. I would much rather stay down here and not have to try to be perfect.’

‘No – no’. He wouldn't hear of it. ‘You're much safer up there where I can't spoil; I'd only destroy you in the end.’

The Goddess would rather have risked it. Sighing, she begged,

‘May I stay for a little while? I won't talk.’

‘All right - of course, love. Its not like that you know. Just, sometimes I need to be alone with my thoughts and, try as I may, I can't control them - or my actions!’

Then, mischievously again, he looked at her and confessed.

‘I hope you don't mind. I was exploring your pedestal and found that both my feet fitted onto the platform. Suddenly, after I had shuffled round and round I settled and looked up - then I saw them. A whole crowd had gathered and were waiting to listen to me. They seemed to want me to talk about it - The Bomb - I mean. It was quite good, my speech! Mind you once I did talk, I think they regretted it a bit!’

His eyes twinkled; the Devil in him.

‘I had to make them feel uncomfortable, not because I wanted to but to make them think about that damned doomed Mushroom. Well yes, I did want them to wriggle in their conscience a bit. Anyway I fell off my perch!’

He laughed and she praised him, but inside wondered what that had to do with art - and then said so. The Faun exploded,

‘ART - art? God, what's that? All this pretentiousness, giving it a label. There's no such thing as ART - or artists for that matter. They are not a precious elite excluding others.’ He was shouting at the top of his voice now. ‘Anyway what about scientists?’

‘Oh, they can be artists too, a most sublime creation at their best...!’

‘...and at worst?’ The Bomb I suppose! Don't be so patronising.’

‘I'm not.’

' Oh yes you are. Just because you've been up on that pedestal most of the time on your own, it doesn't give you the right to be select.'

' Well I am anyway - as an artist!'

' That's a sign of your delusion.'

' What about yours?'

' I haven't any.'

' Oh yes you have - God, you have.'

' Well, they're justified truths. At least I know from actual experience down here with all my patients - clients you would call them.'

The Goddess came nearer and stroked his cheeks.

' Don't do that. You'll make me rise to the occasion and then I might love you too much - or lose you or something. I couldn't bear that - any of it. Its nearly time for you to get back up there. And don't have any grand ideas about you and me, or our art - ART. No-one else thinks we'll succeed.'

' I do.'

' Well - you..'

' I'm worth something.'

' Yes, I suppose so. I'm not!'

' Of course you are... Hasn't anyone ever told you?'

He gave her a peck, a brush of a kiss and smacked her smooth behind.

' Mmm... come on - or you'll have me randy for you.'

' Good.'

The Goddess loved earth, and fauns - the whole species.

' No, I'm not playing your sort of games.' He was stern.

She silently lifted herself off their comfortable pile of leaves and left him there sulking, turned away from her.

Spreading her arms sensuously towards the sky, she lifted her face and sang. The swallows dipped round as she skipped away towards her pedestal. Soon the Faun sneaked a look over his shoulder, glancing after her enviously, for her freedom - and, dammit again wanted her. She just wished he really did. Drat the girl, all that neurotic posing again. He grunted, she heard but did not stop climbing up onto her stand and stood there with her back to him, looking into distance. He raised himself on one elbow. From the waist downwards he supposed his hackles had risen because he felt a sharp ridge rise into bristle; the backs of his legs itched with aggravated heat too. He looked over to her.

' Stuff her... ' he muttered to himself, got up and walked away.

Later that night the Goddess was gazing out to the stars and the new moon; it was finely nail-pared. The Faun came up to her pillar and clanked a bottle against its base. Like a greedy hound to the rattle of chocolate paper, she turned her head - and he smiled.

' Got you!'

He was delighted and leaned over to make her toes curl with a delicate kiss.

' Prehensile too. Temptress!'

Of course she came down. They did not talk about it then, the driving. It was drink, baked fish, fruit and wine. And the Faun wooed her ever closer with enticing words, reading her praises in poems from past poetic immortals to their mistresses.

' You're beautiful you know! '

She said nothing - and then he admitted,

' No, I can't do that sort of thing. Well - you are, anyway.'

' What? '

' Gorgeous - and hot stone! '

' Thank you.' Gratefully she stroked his hand and made

his hooves twitch - desperately.

' Oh, you know - well you are.'

' So are you...!' He was waiting to hear that. She continued, 'I like your bottom, neat and tight.'

' You should like other things; my face for instance.'

' I do...'

The Faun blocked further conversation. Her stone became warm flesh and glowed supple for him. Raising himself over her he knew that he had won. They were on the leaves and he thumped away squirrels searching for kernels. He kept her covered with his fur.

' I like laying you on earth.'

A bee honed over and rested on his head. The Faun felt the tiny raspings of its legs and jumped up.

' Buzz - bee...'

He stamped his hooves and shook himself. Going to the stream he filled an acorn cup with clear water and presented it to her. These were the hours of contentment before the dangers of dawn wound him up again.

' I can't sleep, can you?'

He woke up her deep separation, made her listen and wading through many mires of controversy, ended up with that, alas, of the previous day. The Goddess felt her humiliation return.

' I have the right to choose - and will. After all you said last night, how can I have any confidence in your guiding - and I don't. I'm not going to collaborate in your wish for annihilation; that, if you must, you can do alone.'

' Nonsense. I refuse to be a part of your irrational behaviour.'

' I haven't much - only that. After all you have yours.'

' Right. But all the same...'

The Faun refused to change, neither did the Goddess.
So
now they were even more separate. Soon enough the Faun realised that her flesh was changing. Her tears wet his beard; he liked their damp, and kissed her eyes.

'Come on, I'll take you back - slowly.'

The moon slipped behind a cloud and left them in pale light. Then the Faun held the cart handles and pulled it round. As his speed increased, so his anger diminished, but he didn't get rid of it entirely, so when he had raced her round the park a few times he deposited her below her pedestal. Their distance had already been regained before she climbed, retrieving her book as she went up.

'North again - my hill. Do you want to share?'

'No, it wouldn't work. I know it wouldn't.'

'I know it too.'

'Too messy, not enough room - beside I need to be alone.'

The Goddess had stopped listening, their glow gone and the dawn pink on her sculpture replaced by cool white. Did he ever ask what she needed? She started to write...

Meanwhile the Faun wondered. Had she already forgotten him? Damned Goddess, all those airs; who did she think she was anyway? A Goddess of course! Well, she was a bit - but then that made him a bit of a God and gave them both dangerous airs of delusion!

He knew he would have to wait a couple of weeks for her now.

This time the Faun had gone too far with his chariot

driving. The Goddess needed her distance, and that was not far enough away on her pedestal.

One evening the Faun had scampered off elsewhere to revel with pan-pipes and feasting, 'and God knows what else' the Goddess thought. She made a difficult effort and slid down the pillar to soft earth: then she kissed it for its smell and luxuriated.

The stars were bright and the moon nearly round; a happy danger of clear light and full tides. Her sap rose and she felt a nonsensical transformation from cold alabaster into clay at low heat. Her kiln had started up its fire again.

For hours she travelled on her own, higher and higher, further and further away. The moon guided and, although she felt a little guilty for leaving the Faun without permission, which he would probably have given anyway, she was soon enjoying her own thoughts.

It was a beautiful northern Mount Olympus tucked into the side of the hill. With cosy warmth around a blazing fire of fervour and creation they were all sitting, mesmerised, those aspiring mortals who believed in themselves - even if not totally one another. No need for pedestals here, they were all tightly squeezed onto one communal platform.

The Goddess felt rather an outsider with their loud expressions of culture: she sat at the side and watched them. But it was a relief to have left her own pedestal- and the Faun
- in the city.

So, those earth creatures soared in words. The Goddess did not contribute much: she rested from her journey and watched; just waited. They weren't all that godly, no more than herself; and she didn't believe in the human construction of pillars. She had been a sculptress and believed in clay and earth - and that wretched fate could always reduce it to pulp again. In the midst of all this meandering she was aware of a gaze on her. Brown eyes beautifully drawn, and that smile - oh Gods - from such a mouth. A real God had infiltrated, a hero - or was he just a lump of clay that would warm to her? She hoped so.

Was it the blazing fire, or was there now no alabaster at all in her? She pinched her arms to find out, and they were

burning: no core of stone at all!

' Thank God,' she whispered to herself.

So there was not one scrap of cold, no pure example left. He feet hardly touched ground and inside her head seemed blurred; in an aura one of them said later. Her eyes misted in
in
gratitude, then cleared as he came over to her. She fell at his feet.

' You are a Goddess.'

' No, just human.'

' Let me help you up.'

' Are you a God? '

' No - warm clay like you.'

' Good.'

Over those days her Hero carried her through the rain above
above
even that Olympus to such heights that only the Gods knew their grace. But they were too high, and those same Deities became angry with the threatened rivalry against allegiance to their own immortality. This was not to be permitted; must not be. That silhouette of two blended into one on a ridge of the promontary only just below the clouds was a challenge to their power. They persuaded the couple to look carefully. The valley was so steep and far down, the hills opposite so high - and the city, well it hardly existed.

How it happened, and how they fell, bewildered the Goddess beyond even her belief. In fact they did not fall into the valley. The tumble came later because, by loving, they had kneaded each other's clay so that it wouldn't fit onto the
separate pedestals in their remote cities any more... only
while they were together. Then Hero became too mortal. With all its shaming he forgot that the Goddess was watching: she had placed him too high and, with one blow, he felled himself before her forever. Why? Only the Gods knew. No, the whole house: he had kissed another goddess in front of them all!

The warmth drained out of her clay like the speeding of melting snow; it left ice-cold shock behind. The Goddess stiffened back into sculpture and hunted frantically for her pedestal, then remembered that she had left it in the park in that far away city. Hating it, horrified at him, her Hero, she ran down the valley to join the flooded waters of the millstream.

When she returned, Hero had left with the others - and with him went all those dreams of a future on earth. By the front of the house there was only a pile of smashed, fluted carved stones where the poets had all been, with a cat bending its body over them in search of something - a feline tom perhaps? Cats have no pedestals, they make their own on padded paws.

So, for the Goddess one of the longest days began as she found her way back to the city. Yet something from the hills was enclosed in her core; its riches, even if more loss.

She crept back to the park and found her pillar still there, did not attempt to climb but just put her head against it and sobbed. The birds flew round, pirouetting, and she heard their spring voices chipping clear, similar songs to those in the quarry above their valley. Her tears fell, gemstones to gravel at her feet - were his the same, gems? Did he weep for her at all? She knew he did, and that to feel so high inevitably they had to fall beyond all earthly depths. After all Pluto had been so angry with Persephone, why not with them?

A hand pressed her shoulder. The Faun's voice brought her back.

' Well love? '

' I've fallen. I made you promise me and now I've done it.'

' Oh.'

Pause.

' Well? '

' He told me he was in love with me? '

' And did you believe it? '

' Yes, I'm in love with him.'

' Do you believe that too? '

' Yes, of course - well, I suppose so.'

' Don't you suppose you could have been in love with an unattainable ideal? '

' What ideal? '

' You made him a hero - and he made you a goddess! '

' Perhaps that's what's needed for viability? '

' For your reality you mean? '

' But it wasn't somehow. Dream and isolation; perfection for two - between us two.'

The Goddess was trying to climb back onto her pillar again.

' No sense. For God's sake, girl, stay off your high horse, your pedestal and talk to me here on the ground; at least then you'll be on a level with me! I can't see you well at all now, your head's in the clouds. '

She came back slowly, so hesitant that he could have screamed at her to kick her along. But he resisted as he could see the tears on her cheeks running unheeded under the curve of her chin.

' Come here my beauty, be earthly for a while. There are other things than romance. '

She was silent, near him but not too close. He didn't try to put his arm round her. She waited. Now he got up and sped, nervous and with an uncontrollable sort of anger, jealously anxious and furious with himself and his upright desire. He shouted at her over his shoulder as he ran,

' Of course he wanted you. Of course you wanted him. Of course you planned, he planned; all that stuff of settling in a rat's nest for two with its walls crumbling into the millstream. Of course you believed in each other - for those few days. But its different coming back to your responsibilities and finding the slots different. Besides these escapades into the hills... good God, girl, that's what they're for. '

' No they aren't. '

' Oh yes they are.' The Faun was walking back to her, somewhat triumphant. ' Don't kid yourself - or him! You can't kid me anyway - even if I am a sort of emasculated goat - cuckolded ninney - which, by heaven, I'm not! ' He paused and then whispered softly, ' I only faun for you - on you! '

The Goddess laughed relief.

' But it wasn't meant to happen. After all, it was mid winter and not randy June; no spores, no pollen count...'

' Sperm more like! '

He roared and, inspite of herself, she had to laugh at his vulgar magnanimity. Then she burst into tears.

' You'll recover. We all do. Nothing ever works for long, and certainly not that sort of perfection. Well, I can't face you this time, can't bear it myself really. All this romantic stuff, I just don't believe in it...'

' All right, but you go berserk in your own way.'

' True, yes I suppose so. We're all different. '

' ...and the same! '

The Faun turned his back. Now the Goddess noticed something of sorrow in his stance, would have comforted but did not dare. She had fallen too far off her pillar.

' Would you like my pedestal? I think its yours, I want you to have it; you more than deserve it.

' No thanks. Not likely. I couldn't live up to it, or down. ' A stiff prick has no conscience ' that's the Jewish faun in me - probably for the Celts too! I'm much safer down here and then I can enjoy my imperfections...'

' All very well for you... ' She was getting peeved again, 'Its creatures like you that lift me up; I couldn't even reach the platform on my own. And then you let us down... not gently, but with a massive bump.'

' Well you do look fine up when you're up there. You partly belong and I can gaze up at you, my dear, instead of to my navel or my toes! '

The Goddess looked away and was crying again. The Faun picked up a petal and wiped her tears.

' Come on, its not that bad. I knew you'd do it, something like this - and why not? Its warming and good for you. The bloom hasn't worn off yet, and its lovely. ' He looked deeply into her eyes, but again restrained feeling her.

' Let me help you up again. '

' Can't I stay down? '

' No - not this week. You would be cooler than I could bear towards me than your reflected warmth on me from up there. '

' Will you desert me after all this? ' She was begging him now.

' No...'

He laughed doubtfully.

' No, of course not; don't be silly. I'm not like that - even if you are! Here, let me help you. '

The Faun cupped his hands and the Goddess delicately rested one foot on them.

' Dammit, girl, must you use those provocative pink nails? '

He kissed her toe, and she jumped up quickly.

' That's better. ' He laughed. ' Thought that would chase you - chaste woman - unchased goddess. Oh God...'

He ran. Then she came down again.

Eventually the Goddess fell asleep at the foot of the pedestal, where the leaves had become damp with her tears. When she woke up she saw the Faun standing above her. He was stroking a fat bottle with a gold top from under his arm; mischievously he invited,

' Drown your sorrows woman. For God's sake snap out of it. Sink yourself and drown in this Saumur river - and come to me.'

But the magic had left and he could not warm her stone back to life again. Not even his humour sustained because she belonged to those hills, that far distant man, mortal half-god - a Hero to her. No words, but the Faun understood; he had to - at least for now. He turned and walked into the distance of the park. The Goddess sympathised but as she remembered the tunes from those far high woods, her own tears dropped on each toe and, miraculously, their paint was washed away. At least that part was pure.

The Goddess climbed back onto her pedestal for the last time, not in desperation but to restore herself in calm. Sham in stone, no goddess and none of them willing to allow her to be just a human woman - and so very imperfect.

Swallows were circling above her and, watching them, she joined their flight. It was difficult to be poised between heaven and earth and still to keep a balance.

NIGHT BUS IN LONDON

' Move along der, com' along now.' The conductor called out pleasantly as his evening mob squeezed into the lower deck of the bus.

' No more now... plenny room on top. Fares please.' He was talking to a young man with big hands and feet, a heavy featured face and wearing jeans and T.shirt. The Pakistani conductor absent-mindedly rolled out the wrong tickets and overcharged, so the passenger went on holding out his hand.

' Uh...? Oh sorry love, I make mistake; all dis talking in 'ere' and he beamed at him pleasantly.

The young man observed and commented, ' You must be saving up for a new bus in Bangladesh?!'

They laughed together as the conductor rolled off the right ticket and placed the wrong one in his top pocket. The bus stopped again and a crowd of jolly Nigerians piled on. They were kinky boys with flashing eyes, hats and scarves worn at rakish angles and lots of laughter. They teased the conductor because they were young - or perhaps because they knew him. Anyway the good mood was infectious.

' Come along der you - Bangladeshi...' The Gold Coast man shouted more loudly as his voice reverberated with the others down the gangway.

' All right, all right, I commin' - an' don' you give me cheek. Ders room opstairs fer yours lot.'

No-one took any notice, or offence. They all just flooded the platform and swung on the handrails, swaying with the motion of the proceeding bus. An old man tottered on at the next stop. He was sporting a soft pinched hat and grasping the rail for his dear life with his thin grasping hands. The passengers squashed up to give him room on the long seat near the entry. He sat down, rocking unstably. The bell rang again and the bus hurtled on. At the next stop a white haired old biddy called out grandly,

' Can you wait while I get on? I'm partly blind you see.'

Someone else from the street called too,

' Can you help her please?'

Several people near the exit hauled the old lady up and she was soon settled on a seat. Her bandaged legs under thick lisle stockings were now planted firmly in front of her displaying them obviously, and she held her Queen Mary type toque arrogantly upright on her head. On a lead she held a puny dog, which soon crouched at her feet. Pale-faced and proud, she announced,

' You see, my daughter's away and I was invited for dinner. I don't usually travel without her, but you see I was invited out for dinner...' she repeated to everyone and then trailed off rather apologetically ' You see... I'm eighty-one.'

The old man beside her went on rocking and smiling to himself. The young man thought he was going to announce that he was eighty-two, but the old chap said nothing; he was staring beyond them all.

Soon the Nigerians left, carrying after them the welcome sound of their noisy goodnights. The bus was quieter now. Then suddenly there was a commotion as people moved their feet further under their seats.

'Deery me... Now look at dat!'

Everyone did.

A black poodle with head erect, arched back and striking metronome tail was sniffing naturally, but improperly for a crowded compartment, then proceeded to mount the long low table back of a submissive dachshund.

'HOW DISGUSTING... Get them off.' The old lady hit out ineffectually with her rolled umbrella. 'In MY day... that sort of thing was done outside on a proper stud farm. No embarrassment to children then... Only mongrels 'do that' in the gutter...' She paused, 'or here in a public vehicle.' She sniffed, visibly indignantly affronted. Then, under her breath nearly inaudibly, 'Poor Othello, my pet.'

There was laughter and active curiosity as everyone peered to glimpse and relish the antics of the dogs. The Paki conductor apologised.

'Well Ma'am; please excuse on behalf of my employers, The Inner London Transport Authority. They certainly would not like dis. We don't allow either, but dis is beyond my control. They have not paid fare either.' Hand on chin, he paused a moment. Then he lifted his finger as though suddenly inspired,

'Excuse ples Ma'am, but isn't one of dese yours?'

The old lady held her head well down. Then she raised her eyes, full of guilt. 'Well, ye..s.'

'Well, you no paid fare - one. Half price animals - two. I don' wan' to cause trouble but dogs upstairs like smokers - three. You break de English Law, Ma'am, like dat. An' I don' wan' to report you for causing public disturbance- or nuisance. Dogs must be in - no on - under control. Perhaps like human! See?'

He laughed as the old lady exploded with frustration and shameless fury about other people's, foreigners in particular, manners, or lack of. The Bangladesh gentleman raised himself up to his full five feet four inches in height and informed everyone proudly,

'We have much courtesy Ma'am. MUCH good manners. It is in our religion see. All our family education since little children, see... We wouldn't allow dogs on buses anyhow. Unclean to us, see?'

He had no more to say so there was a new, amused but anxious silence. Several bus stops had gone by un-noticed. During the altercation between the considerate conductor and the preposterous old lady, the dogs had had time to finish copulating. The poodle, having swung a leg over the back of the dachshund now carefully extricated himself. He retired under the seat again to lick himself tidy. The old lady persuaded her dog out crossly, but very firmly. She lifted him up. He glared at her angrily so she returned his look and said nothing. Stretching out her arm, mink cuffed wrist trembling, she rang the bell for the next request stop. As she alighted she announced to them all that she would report the incident to 'higher authorities'.

'You do dat Ma'am. De Good Lord will approve...' and he muttered to himself, 'an' you keep your dirty dog to yourself on your own stud farm in future.'

No-one seemed to own the dachshund which remained tactfully hidden under another seat. It was already forgotten as a gentle Mimi rather than Desdemona. The bus travelled on. Then the young student began talking to the angry coloured seething conductor and observed that fares were soon going up.

'Ah yes, well, when de fares rise I get a new bus.'

'But I'd rather the fares stayed put and we kept the old buses.'

'No, no-no' the Pakistani replied emphatically 'New bus velly nice, and with air-conditioning. See here, velly' ot, in the eighties in summer.' He smiled hopefully.

'Its all right, we don't need air-conditioning, we can open the window', the student rejoined.

'No, no - open windows give draught, we must have air-conditioning.'

Silence reigned while they thought. The bus conductor was transferring money from the ticket box into a bag in a container from a little cupboard above the luggage space on the platform.

'You could keep refreshments in there - drink?' the student added.

Our Pakistani rattled the coins around, thinking, then said enthusiastically, 'Yes, yes, a velly good idea. Yes, an' we could have an ice box...yes.' The young man agreed and said he would come to it.'

'Yes, an' too, I would sell with the Green Shield stamps!'

Uproarious laughter together as the student slipped off the platform backwards at the lights and skipped between the waiting cars.

'Goodnight, my friend.'

'Goodnight, sah.'

The bus moved forward as the lights changed to green.

BATTERSEA PARK PROBLEM

Walking down on the Embankment, Battersea Park was full of golden leaves ready to fall. Many were in patterns carpeted on the ground, weaving between each other this way and that. Meshes of yellows, pale greens and some reds were woven into a weft against the warp of dark brown earth, path stones and green grass.

I went towards the Embankment wall and watched the great old River Thames. It was in full spate at high tide and vaguely misted over still water towards the other side. A mellow autumn was unfolding in silence except for one River Police boat speeding confidently towards the city. Then a stranger came into view. A huge boat was towing an enormous barge packed high with orange-rusted container boxes. It kept up a steady low speed and left a white wash of swell behind as it ploughed its way down river. There was nothing strange about this.

What was strange however, and wonderfully humorous, was what the boat contained. As its skipper navigated the river from a top cabin, on the main deck his mate was skipping! He made an almost musical synchronisation with the pulse of the engine and the flow of the river. He skipped and skipped, without pause or stop; neither looking to left nor right, but straight ahead. Hardly an automaton, yet he seemed to be logically exercising his body normally forced to stand in front of the tiller for hours.

So what came over to me was an equation of chronology: a problem of time versus speed and distance. The boat was moving at one speed to a regulated time, horizontally. The man was skipping up and down at his own speed, yet vertically balanced against that of the moving boat. Real time was passing anyway. What was totally confusing was that the man seemed almost poised on an instant of time, immobile yet jumping up and down. The boat was visibly moving, but the man seemed static even though he was skipping on one spot!

Was it all to do with Einstein's Theory of Relativity? I had to add the fact that as both man and boat travelled forward, so the Earth was rotating! Yet it was early afternoon and the man and boat were travelling east. But was the Earth rotating towards the west, to sunset, and therefore hampering the combined speeds of both man and boat, deducting some distance as well as speed from their progress?

Does it matter anyway? Not much. Oh yes, there was an extra factor which was that the tide was nearly full, high and coming from the east, its current acting as a counterforce to the progress of the boat. This was in turn obviously influenced by the power of the engine; so how could the man bounce up and down with his skipping rope, keeping perfect balance against all those forces of motion? It looked like a real miracle: I think it was! I kept those visual moments clear as my mind battled with the notion of progress. To complete, what of the moments of time inexorably moving forward in the man's life, with the day's revolution and the boat's progress against the tide? A small dog had been lifted up to look over the river wall.

It barked vigorously at some ducks. With his eyes strictly forward, the man on the boat went on skipping.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A SMALL BOY

The Seine is flowing, not slowly but energetically; rhythmically. A small boy, aged eight, is following an old man hobbling painfully over the cobbles. The boy is shabbily dressed with a brown cloth cap, worn jacket and trousers, and broken shoes. He is an urchin boy, a gamin, mischievous one too.

The boy has one gleaming treasure, a mouth organ. As the old man weaves his way by the side of the river the boy follows him, mimicking his footsteps and playing snatches of street tunes on his mouth organ. The boy is also imitating a game of 'Grandmother's Footsteps', except that this one is to a grandfather. Each time the old man turns round to catch him at his playing, the boy disappears; his tune fading with him. What was the old man's disturbed peace returns: he walks on.

This is repeated a number of times. At each new tune the wind becomes stronger, or the rain lashes down making deeper puddles between the cobblestones. There are floating pigeons balancing on each up current of wind and down again on the lull. Paper rubbish lifts like those city doves, white wings papering triangles and curves into the dark clouds. It is hard to distinguish between blown paper and the floating birds.

The boy nips out of a wall retreat and pitches his mouth organ into a high bird song, but the birds are silent. Suddenly the old man sees the boy and tries to catch him with his hat. But he only manages to cuff the boy, knock off his cap and set his hair into wild milk crusts. The boy ducks under the old man's flailing arm and escapes, raising two fingers at him. The old man is shocked; swears and mutters, then plods on. They play 'Cat and Mouse' a while longer: the old Tom too frail to catch, the Mouse so quick that escape, retreat and return defy any attempted pounce of the old Tom. The boy always follows at about ten feet of distance; just out of grasping reach.

They soon come away from the Seine as the cobbles cease and merge into a huge tarmac circle, with a central obelisk and a cathedral to one side. The old man disappears quickly into the porch, to be absorbed by a crowd coming out of the cathedral doors. The sounds of the huge organ inside continuing the end of the service overwhelm the boy standing outside. He raises his own mouth organ and tries to invent a tune to play along with it. He does not succeed as the harmonies of devotional hymn are not like street melody. His simple songs only reach a pale thin sound in the rain as they fade into its damp.

He wipes his eyes free of raindrops and tears, smears them in streaks across from his nose to his cheeks. Then he produces a last wail on the mouth organ: it cries out for him. He pulls a

grubby cloth, hardly a handkerchief, from his pocket and wraps it round the wet slimed instrument. Then he pushes it back into his pocket.

Now the boy is forlorn. He has lost sight of the old man to taunt, he cannot compete with the thunderous bellows of the cathedral organ, and the rain is coming down so heavily that it has soaked his cap and is trickling down his neck. He is cold and hungry, and a long way from any home. He crosses the roundabout and soon finds continuation of the path by the Seine. But he is still alone, all alone. Now the birds have flown like the old man, to shelter in the cathedral. No cats play out: cats hate rain.

To cheer himself and try to keep warm, he starts to hop, skip and jump across the cobbles. There are bigger puddles and into these he splashes, intentionally regardless. Now he is happier so, retrieving his mouth organ he wipes it across the side of his trousers and begins to play again.

There are tall wide long steps that rise up between the plane trees and sweep down to the path where he is standing. The wind is playing tricks with the sticky wet leaves. They are spinning in circles; waving, falling or just glittering, he believes in response to his playing. His music reaches up while the wind carries it on until the boy fills far treetops with his melodies and street songs.

As if by magic, out they come. Noiselessly, from no-where they begin to appear. They start to tap, they start to dance. They are many, the children, as they join his music and sing to his tunes. It is they who have started a music festival for children with all these small boys and girls singing in the rain. The music does not keep still; the children cannot keep still. They run up and down those steps in the shimmering rain. So does the boy. That gamin, that street urchin plays on and on, more and more wonderfully – and wildly. Up and down the steps he goes, spinning and winning. From the top he chases the little girls down the steps, their full skirts billowing, their long hair flowing. How they laugh, their happy sounds blown everywhere by the wind and the songs. The other boys try to fight him off, but the boy escapes.

Yet he is a lonely boy and has had enough of music. He stops as the rain stops: the children stand still. He nods to them shyly and then walks back to the river where he begins to follow the old man who has just appeared again. The children do not know that the boy has found a grandfather, but they do notice the old man offering his hand to the boy who gratefully reaches out for it. As they walk away together, the children slowly return home.

The river and the cobbles are silent. The rain has stopped, so have the voices of the children singing. The boy's song is silent; his mouth organ safely returned to his pocket. Now his hand is warm enough to share the pulse beat from the heart of his grandfather.

A STATE OF AMBITION

Ben, Nick and Martin were sitting at the top of Peckforton Hill. School had just finished, and they were tired of learning from subjects that might be useful to them as adults. One of the last lessons was a project on ecology, which they all liked. Because their mother and father were busy with Christmas preparations, they took their bicycles and decided to go out on their own. It was late afternoon, they arrived and left their bicycles secured to a fence at the bottom of the wood. So here they were at the top of the hill sitting on a rotten old log that had silvery green of lichen decorating all round its sides.

To begin with none of them spoke. Ben was looking into the distance, Nick was travelling in his own imaginary world, and Martin was watching a blackbird. It was hopping round bits of fallen leaves and the last vestiges of autumn; worms, grubs, beetles and beech mast. Dreamily, Martin was being carried away. He thought he was sitting astride the blackbird's back holding onto the base of its wings and encouraging it by using a dark cluck-plucking sound as the blackbird flew off into the distance. It pointed its sharp orange beak forward, a gold-ringed eye occasionally looking back over the bird's shoulder to see if its lively charge was still there.

'Come on, come on' Martin begged. Nick called over to him and Martin realised that he was not really flying, but still sitting on a log with his brothers.

'I'm tired of school. I'm looking forward to Christmas and the holidays that come after. Maybe we will be able to see some films: I did like the television series of 'Walking with Beasts'.

It had not all been hard work. They had just seen an amazing film of fantasy, in fact a wonderful and magical performance the previous weekend. Ben and Nick had read the book of 'Lord of the Rings' by Tolkien, on which the film was based. Martin had not so he was even more astounded by what he had seen. They started to discuss it between themselves.

Ben was full of admiration for the wonderful landscapes and mountain ranges in the film, which had been shot in New Zealand. 'For me that was the best part, the piling up of wild images one on top of another; the mist in the valleys, the snow on the mountain tops and the deep mystery down the ravines, in the caves and on the cliff edges.'

Nick continued. 'I thought the battle scenes were fantastic; very gruesome, very realistic and pretty scary in their extreme make up. When I saw 'The Lion King' as a young boy I found the purple eyes in the hyenas wonderfully exciting. But this film is nothing like that, it was much more adult.'

Martin looked up. 'I found it miles too long, and pretty tiring with the cameras zooming in and out; it made my eyes ache and I felt quite giddy. But I also liked the wide settings that were very beautiful, like the best illustrations I have ever seen in fairy-tale books. I wish I could paint like that.'

'You never will, and neither will I. But if I had a very expensive camera, later I could film landscapes like the one we're watching now and get fabulous pictures of sunsets, drawings

made by the aeroplanes' white vapour and... well we could imagine...' Ben trailed off as Nick added,

'Let's try now!'

They lay down on the leaves that the blackbird had been turning over in search of more worms and stretched out on their backs, looking up through the bare tree branches into the clear evening sky.

'Shut your eyes you two, and float down below the wood, across the fields and right across into distance where the sea circles round the Welsh coast. How are you flying Nick?'

'Oh, I'm on a Welsh dragon; red of course. The beast is waving its spiky back and tail to and fro to help its wings keep it up in the air. I find it quite difficult riding while I'm on its back, partly because of the spikes and partly as the body is covered in scales; they are very slippery. Strangely enough it's quite cold up here, although I can see that the dragon is puffing out smoke and flames from its mouth. I suppose that's a bit like the aeroplanes white vapour - with fire added!'

'Me, I'm still on my blackbird and its flying too slowly to keep up with you. I can't dig it in the ribs with my shoes because they are only trainers and the blackbird's ribs are covered with feathers. I wish it would go faster. Come on blackbird - hurry!'

There was a short pause when they found themselves, now with their eyes open again, not in the distance at all but lying in the lovely bouncy heather at the open part of the top of the hill. They quickly shut their eyes again. It was no longer nearly evening, but late summer in the middle of a warm afternoon. The sound of the slight breeze through the gorse and its heady coconut-like smell wafting over towards them made them rather sleepy. Ben started up again.

'The difference between a film, however well directed, and up here is that it is just as beautiful where we are sitting. No I can't compare, they are separate landscapes. There was so much violence in the film of the 'Lord of The Rings' that I don't remember reading about in the book, and certainly up here and in the woods below there is no trace of fighting battles and people killing each other.'

'Well that part was very well done, especially the blood and gore with all those skeletons and skulls. The makeup was fantastic, almost deliciously horrible!' Nick shook himself like an excited and frightened animal.

Martin had given up listening and was leaning on his elbows. He had found a velvety mushroom and was trying to touch its underside. The feel of its gills was as special as running a scale down on the piano. He picked the creamy dome, turned it upside down and saw that its gills were a beautiful pinkish colour. Ben and Nicky came and looked at it too.

'The French call it 'un rose du pre' a rose of the field, or little champ-ignon, like mignon, sweet as Josephine...' He had lost them.

Nick started up again. ‘ Do you think there are so many violent films in the cinema as well as on TV, because we have had peace in this country for over fifty years and, men especially, seem to need the excitement of war to cool their strength? That’s what grown-ups say, anyway. In this film I noticed that one of the villains was tall, thin, and handsome. He even looked like Osama bin Laden and lived in a deep cave with all his men! It is a strange coincidence because the film had been made more than two years before the September catastrophe in New York.’

There was a lull, while all three boys lay back and carried their thoughts away more pleasantly into the summer’s day. What is so strange about daydreams is that not only do they take you into quite extraordinary circumstances, but also into different seasons. The boys were not aware that this time they were all in the same season, and on a similar tack. That was not surprising as it was winter and they were in the French Alps on a ski slope. No French mushrooms there, but grand panoramas of the most beautiful mountains they could imagine - except those they had seen in ‘The Lord of the Rings’. Perhaps they could visit New Zealand to those mountains sometime later when they became adults.

Although they were on the snow slopes, their thoughts were different. Ben was high up with Nick and looking very smart in his outfit. He and Nick were glancing shyly, and even competitively, at how tall and fine they were becoming, especially in their snowsuits. Ben had already seen a girl with long blonde hair who was eyeing him. It used to be said ‘giving her, or him, the glad eye’ but now it is more obvious. Nick was into mountain thoughts but did notice that this girl had a friend, who had dark short hair and vivacious looks. He thought she would be great fun to ski with. He smiled his thoughts to Ben, who blushed a little.

Martin was rather apprehensive. He could not see anyone of his own age and wondered how on earth, or snow, he could keep up with his big brothers. Well, all three had had dry ski slope training, so he began to practise a bit. He tried skiing round in a circle, on one leg and then he collapsed in a laughing heap onto the snow! That wasn’t bad, he was encouraged. Maybe he could fly fast, at least down a mountain slope later.

But this was not yet reality. They were still only sitting on the top of Peckforton Hill dreaming in late summer. Ben asked his brothers, ‘Let’s make up a story together? Just a few lines each, so that it’s not so long until our holiday. Think of a new sort of film.’

‘Okay, I’ll begin.’ Nick was excited. ‘It was a dark and stormy night...’ He giggled and added, ‘No that’s another story, this is one for now. ‘It was a wonderful night. The moon was a clear sort of lemon yellow and there were no clouds. The moonlight cast sharp dark shadows from the tall pine trees onto the unspoiled snow...’

‘I know, I know...’ piped up Martin, ‘Here we are, coming sweeping and sliding through the woods being chased by big black bears with their hungry mouths wide open...’ Ben chipped in, ‘Oh yes, Martin!’

‘Anyway we could just be skiing by moonlight’ Nick continued ‘we had put on salopets and anoraks over our pyjamas...and anyway this had to be magic. We began to ski as though we had been doing it for years...’

'And - and we were following each other through the woods, down steep slopes over snow clear of man's footprints, at least only those of deer...' My teacher once said, 'Ganz im meine spoor' which means 'full in my tracks.' Deer mark theirs by droppings to guide mates, or find each other.

Ben was ahead, gracefully making his own tracks shine out in parallels cut into the snow like railway lines. Nick was in his own thoughts again, wondering about great mammoths walking on flat glaciers, eagles on heights and rushing avalanches, added to scary feelings of being lost. He shuddered. Ben asked, but he did not tell him his fears. Ben beamed at him,

'I think it's going to be absolutely brilliant. Don't forget, there will be new friends, cousins to ski with...'

'And cake at the end of the day...'

'And wine for us bigger ones...'

'And late-night discos and dancing...'

Martin became quiet, then, 'Well, I have cousins of my own age to ski with. We will be higher than the nursery slopes; those are for Toby and Jo-Jo, but I won't be as high as Ben and Nick. I don't want to be, *really*...'

Ben turned to him affectionately, 'We'll come and ski with you in the afternoons when our ski classes are over.' Martin brightened, 'Oh good, I'd *love* that.'

Where were their parents? In class higher up, skiing downhill, snow ploughing, herringboning, skiing on one leg, two, or falling into laughing heaps. There would be gluwain, cake and hot chocolate for tea when they all came tumbling in, so happy and satisfied with their individual days.

Suddenly it was cold. They sat up and found they were still on Peckforton Hill. It was nearly evening so they ran down to retrieve their bicycles. They were bubbling with their imaginations as they raced home. When they arrived they told their mother, Caroline and their father, Dave, all about future travels as the appetising smell of freshly cooked scones greeted them when they came out of the cold and into the kitchen. What a time they were going to have!

A STATE OF FANTASY

Jaimie walked up the stairs to his room backwards. He called down to Ali who was watching him, not with amazement but rivalry.

'I can do *anything*, you can do' called out Jaimie.

Ali shouted up, 'Not better than me anyway.'

Ali began to *skip* up backwards, turning a neat *somersault* on each landing. He kept a little distance between himself and his big brother when he got to the top.

'So...' Jamie turned his back on his younger brother.

They heard Josephine down in the hall squealing like a stuck pig as she could only climb up slowly on her hands and knees. The boys put their fingers in their ears.

'Stop it Jo-Jo, you're making my ears stand on end.'

'No Ali, your hair.'

'Anyway stop squealing, Jo-Jo.'

By now Josephine had reached the top of the stairs, and was laughing so much that she nearly fell all the way down again.

'Come here.' Jamie held out his arms for her. Ali stretched out and held onto her too, safely from the other side.

'We've got you Jo-Jo.'

Soon she had had enough and wriggled free.

'What have we all come up here for anyway?' Ali put his finger to his mouth and looked as thoughtful as he could.

'Don't you remember – *stupid?*'

'I'm not stupid, I'm clever as a clump of camels...'

'Well, if that's all... they just snort and spit at you.'

'You're just one of those Walking Beasts...'

'Which one?'

'Oh I don't know, the one that slinks along with huge teeth...'

Jaimie was not listening any more. He was rummaging for his book of those computer-driven prehistoric animals. They both looked through the pages for a long time, marvelling at the magnificent technology of the imaginary beasts. Josephine was occupied at the other end of the room. She neither heard more noticed her brothers: she was playing with soft toys and singing.

As it was nearly Christmas the children had been asked, or rather forbidden, to come downstairs to either computer or TV watching until 8 a.m. It did not matter. The moon was careering fast across the sky to try to sleep before waking up the sun.

‘We’ve got the whole day, several days and weeks, because school is finished for the holidays. WHOOPEE.’

Jaimie and Ali looked at each other and laughed. They wondered how earth they could be good for that long so they could use their PlayStations, to wait for hours of excellent behaviour and keep quiet.

‘I know, we could pretend...’ Ali began,

‘I know’ Jamie interrupted and ‘we could pretend we have some sort of magic inside us.’ Jaimie went on ‘not like Harry Potter which I haven’t yet seen, but making house magic. We could fly, turn into beasts - invent. I know, I’ll be the fantastic magician, you Ali could be the boy with amazing powers - Jo-Jo, well, you can’t really be anything...’

Josephine whimpered, ‘I *can* and I can fly’ and she sailed round the room like a fairy with snow on her boots.

‘You could be a Dodo, Jo-Jo.’

‘I don’t want to be a Dodo - what is it?’

‘A fat old bird! Anyway it’s extinct.’

Josephine smiled her best beguiling smile. ‘I’ll be a beautiful bird with gold wings and tail, and a back of many colours. I will become *much larger* than *both of you*.’

‘So we can ride on your back...’

‘That’s right, and we’ll fly all over world, especially to visit Australia.’

‘What’s your name? If you have no name you don’t exist - at least hardly matter...’ Jamie peered at her.

Josephine looked him straight in the eyes. Hers began to twinkle with mischief. ‘I wont just be ‘magician’ or ‘boy’. I’ll be, I know, I’ll be...not Furrylight or Funnylight but Fairylight as I have feathers and can fly!’

‘We’ll call you Featherlight then’ Jaimie announced.

‘Or Flybylight’ added Ali.

Josephine stamped her foot; tears were the beginning to form. 'No - you two' she screamed, 'I'm just Fairylight.'

'But you're quite heavy' and Jaimie tried to pick her up. 'So..oo heavy I can't even carry you!'

'Let me down, let me down.' and she wriggled free, hiding behind Ali.

Ali was silent, thinking fantastic magical thoughts. He skipped a bit and sang a small song of fir- cones as he twirled.

' I've left school
I've come home
and here I am
I'm all alone
with a small fir-cone...'

'That's silly.'

'Well. *you* sing a better one then.'

'Abracadabra
Fee-fo-fum
Ho-Ho, Hum-Hum
my blood is curdling
and my feet are
beginning to run...'

Sure enough, Jaimie looked at his feet and they were beginning to twitch irresistibly.

'Look you two, look at my feet!' They were beginning to tap in a jazz rhythm all on their own, in that exciting form their Daddy calls 'syncopation.'

'I wish there was a guitar was well.' No sooner said than done! Ali found himself holding a silver guitar and strumming the most amazing melody he could not possibly have managed in reality. His fingers were flying all over the strings, like Jamie's feet tapping on the floor. He picked up two tins and began to clap them together.

All Josephine could say was 'OO-oo' as she joined the dance. Round and round she went like a little dervish until she spun so hard she fell and was caught by Ali and Jaimie simultaneously. They landed on the floor in a heap; the guitar stop playing and the tapped base fell silent. The boys turned to Josephine and snarled,

'Jo Jo, you've ruined it.'

Josephine began to cry, so they comforted her with hugs. Jaimie stood upright.

'Let's start again.' By now the moon had slid out of sight, and a glimmer of pale sun was beginning to show its fine globe over the rooftops. Beyond their skylight the outline of Greater London was beginning to become clear.

'Well, at least we've missed our chance of flying out into the mysterious night darkness.'

'I don't mind, I like daylight better.'

'Me too' added Josephine, who had no idea what they were talking about.

'Breakfast' their Mummy called up from downstairs.

'We'll start again after *food*' whispered Jaimie.

They came clattering down into twos or threes; Jaimie and Ali jostling each other for first place, with Josephine bumping into them by sliding down fast on her bottom. Immediately they flung into the kitchen in a heap they smelt the delicious aroma of food.

A STATE OF HAPPINESS

So here is Beanie on a hillside, sitting with her feet cross-legged and thinking of nothing in particular except looking into the distance and wondering what she could see that was not really there. That made her imagination leap and she could see a thousand things a second. It meant she had to choose: would it be a bird, an animal, a sunbeam or a star? She sat there with her finger on her mouth, instead of sucking her thumb; which she had never done. While she was thinking, which was hard work and made her frown, who should come over the horizon but George galloping on a chestnut brown horse. He was pulling something along with him and shouting at the same time.

'Come on Toby, don't drag your feet on the ground otherwise the cart won't pull.'

'Oh Georgie, I'm helping the cart by kicking with my legs, and anyway all the leaves will fall out if I don't help it.'

'Never mind Toby, I can see Beanie up on the hill over there. I wonder what she is thinking about? Anyway she's seen us because she's waving and beckoning for us to come up the hill.'

At this point Toby ran out of puff, so he got out of his cart, took the reins from George and tried to pull both the cart and George with his horse up the hill to see Beanie. Being our strong little fellow Toby, he managed them all and arrived puffing and red in the face from the hard work.

'Well done Toby' Beanie gave him a hug and cuddled him.

'What about me?'

'Of course Georgie, but you have to get off the horse first.'

George didn't need to be asked twice. He slid down the horse's neck, spinning the reins and twisting them so that the horse nearly choked. It tugged, pulled the reins from George's hands and whinnied. He let it loose to wait and eat grass.

'That's all right then. Come over here you two and sit by me.' Beanie was used to telling the boys what to do, and the boys were used to doing what she told them. So they sat down beside her, rather proud of being asked to share whatever it was she was going to do. Beanie held up Toby's head to direct him to looking into the distance.

'See that big puffy cloud over there, what do you see in it?'

'I see a big polar bear, with a white crown of ice on its head.' George was sure.

Toby was still looking and thinking. 'I can't see anything but a fluffy white cloud...' and he started to cry. Beanie hugged him again. She pointed,

'Look harder Toby, can't you see a wonderful white horse with a flowing mane just beginning to canter out of that cloud?'

'No I can't' wailed Toby sadly, 'but yes, I can see a sheep like a bundled up rug being chased by a whale!'

'Don't be silly Toby. Whales can't swim in the clouds, they only swim in the sea.' George knew his geography.

'I know Georgie. But you don't know everything, because you said there was a polar bear in the cloud. Polar bears live on the ground and walk on ice. Nerr.' And he put out his tongue.

'That's enough you boys. Can't you use your imagination?' Beanie tried to pull the two boys apart as they were beginning to fight. Toby's lip began to quiver.

'What's 'imagination?'

'Listen while I tell you what I can see in the clouds: that is my *imagination*, its what I'm *pretending* to see.' Beanie sat up rather straight, and shut her eyes rather dramatically. The boys copied her but it was rather silly because if you shut your eyes you can't see clouds, polar bears or whales! Toby was the first to realise this.

'I can't see anything but black' he announced, taking his hands away from his eyes which had been hidden behind his fingers. 'Now I can.' Beanie and George quickly copied him. Beanie whispered to them both,

'Shhh... don't make a single sound otherwise they might fly away.'

'Who might' said Toby a loud voice.

'Shut up Toby' and George nearly pushed him over.

'We're not getting very far with you two boys; I'm going home.' And Beanie got up ready to go home. The boys jumped up too, and held her by both hands,

'No, no, don't do that, we'll be good.' So they all sat down again, and were silent for at least a minute. Beanie started to chant,

'I spy with my little eye...'

'A pie in the sky - and I want to catch it and eat it.' Toby was dancing, licking his lips, and clapping his hands. George was quiet.

'I can't see anything. Its a silly game anyway' and he was about to sulk when he took his gaze off the sky and looked towards the wood. He whispered, ' But I can see something you can't see' he sang with great excitement.

'Where - where?'

'I spy with my little eye, a teeny, weeny deer with its Mummy. Look, over there where the field meets the edge of the wood.' And there they were, a pretty mother with a speckled back, and her little fawn, also with spots on its back

Now Beanie's imagination was setting to work again. 'I can see three fairies, with pearly wings, dancing round the deer, that means in a state of happiness!'

'What's happiness?'

'Laughing and smiling, Toby.'

'Oh.'

'Anyway they look absolutely beautiful with the sun behind them! '

The boys agreed that they could see them being happy, and beautiful too. Toby was jumping up and down squealing with excitement; the other two quietened him. So he put his finger to his lips and whispered,

'I can also see three teddy bears sitting on the grass beside them having a picnic!' He was proud of himself, so Beanie and George decided to humour him.

'So can I.'

'So can I.'

‘And, and...’ Toby was jumping with both feet now, ‘and they have taken, and they are eating a pie from the sky!’

‘So they are’ echoed Beanie and George together, ‘What’s inside it Toby?’

‘Air pie and walk round’ replied Toby proudly, walking round and round in a circle.

All three children were beginning to feel cold, even though it was only the middle of the morning. But being December, well, you never know. The deer and the teddy bears had finished their picnic and gone back into the woods. Now there was nothing else to see, as no-one sees where fairies fly to.

‘I’m hungry.’ Guess who that is? You are right, it is Toby.

‘I’m going to see more clouds tonight while I’m lying in bed trying to sleep. And I’m going to join their picnic!’

Beanie was walking on ahead holding George’s hand. George looked up at her,

‘I wonder what Father Christmas is going to bring me’ he whispered. Beanie corrected him,

‘Have you written him a letter yet?’

‘No.’

‘Well, how does he know what you want then?’ She was a bit scornful and George didn’t like it. He scowled up at her,

‘Have you written yours already?’

‘No, but I’m going to.’

‘Well then, what’s the difference?’

Toby was singing far ahead in the distance, so the other two ran to catch him up. They all groused at each other a bit because they were cold. ‘I don’t think much of your deer, or your fairies because I couldn’t *really* see them.’ ‘Well, if there were polar bears they were only floating on cloud not walking on icebergs.’ Toby wasn’t listening, as he could not hear them from where he was, but he was thinking of the letter he was going to send Father Christmas. It didn’t matter that he couldn’t write words properly, because he was going to do a big drawing of a man with a round face, a white beard, a big long coat and leather boots. When he had finished it, he told himself, he was going to colour the coat and hat red.

When they got home tea was on the table, with hot buttered blueberry muffins their Mummy had made. Daddy arrived home early from the pottery too, as it was nearly Christmas and he loved Mummy and her muffins. After tea he told them that he had a surprise for them; that they

were to shut their eyes, and not to peep. They all obediently put their hands over their eyes, including Mummy, and Daddy crept out into the garden where he had heaped an enormous Christmas tree. He dragged it inside, already planted in its pot, and placed it by the window. So after tea they all helped decorate it in front of a blazing fire. They finished their letters to Father Christmas, had a bath and came down in their jimjams to sit by the fire for supper.

‘I wish, I wish...’ Toby smiled as he closed his eyes and fell asleep on Daddy’s lap. Beanie and Georgie had already snuggled up, one under each arm of their Mummy. All they had to do now was wait for Christmas! The evening star, beginning to shine outside, thought so too.

THE HORSE WITH THE CURLY MANE

This is the tale, or tail of a girl horse. She was really a pony, but as she was growing up fast *she* liked to think of herself as a horse, a mare, and bellowed this information out at the top of her voice, until she was hoarse - or horse!

To begin with she was a gangly little thing; all bendy legs, wobble, and hopeless helplessness. But her mother laughed, in a horsey voice of course, and pulled this little pony up onto her four feet by her straight long mane. That hurt the little creature so she snorted and swished her tail. She did not know she could do these things, but she was learning fast and soon galloped away.

She grew and grew, joining her brothers and sisters at the top of a field which had a wonderful view over the Vale of Evesham. Mist came up from the river, the clouds came down to meet it. Then the sun came out and warmed them away so that the water sparkled and dew on the grass dropped highlights. She bent down and drank some; they were lovely. Strange how, as you grow up, boys and girls separate for a while. Our pony joined the other young mares, hopefully seeking a gaze at a group of young horses who were stamping their feet, snorting and blowing, tossing manes and tails no, sorry, tails and pretending not to notice the mares flirting their long eyelashes at them.

But there was a difference. Our young mare was very sad. She stood a little way away on her own. All the other ponies had wonderful wavy manes and super curled tails. Her hair was quite straight. She stayed out in the rain instead of under the bushes because she had been told that ‘rain makes your hair curl.’ Well, it did not; after that soaking it dried straighter than ever. The others laughed at her as she joined them, miserably cold and wet. They were sorry and nuzzled her neck playfully, so she felt better. At least they all kept each other warm, huddled together under the wild hazel-nut trees.

The herd seemed happy out on that high hill; so the farmer left them out all winter. Occasionally he went up with his old horse and cart loaded with succulent dry hay and oats. The horses came cantering forward with pleasure as he called them in his familiar, amazingly

horse human voice. It was a mixture of whinny and hoarse noises, snorts and encouragements. They were soon surrounding him to let them have their meal: by nibbling his hair, blowing down his ears and trying to eat the buttons off his coat!

They had their feast so they tossed their manes and the farmer drove away. He was well content to leave them up on the hill and warm his slippers by the ever blazing fire in the grate. His wife made him strong hot tea, and hot buttered toast, so that very soon those horses on the hill became a misty dream in the twilight. He shut his eyes and dozed. The horses on the hill shut *their* eyes and stood under the nut trees until dawn.

Several seasons went by. The farmer noticed that the frost and snow had done the horses good. Their hides became thick, and their magnificent rumps glistened like rich autumn conkers. They took their beauty for granted because both mares and geldings looked alike. All except one. This one was ours, and she was afraid to cry because it was too cold and her tears would have settled on her cheeks like hard diamonds.

Our little pony compared herself with the others. Her mane was still straight, and her tail was still straighter. Most days, especially when it was misty with a hoare frost, no, I did not say horse frost or hoarse frost, most of the time she stood on her own in the long grass, with hogweed and red sorrel towering all round her. The hedge of hawthorn, not horse-thorn, and hips was sharp. But it was lovely because each berry had collected tiny needles of frozen water; the frost of course, although it rhymes with horse of course. The sun was a pale yolk, like an egg newly cracked in a pan with the yellow still whole and the moist white all misty like the mist that sometimes came up in the Vale, or over a pond.

All this is by the way; a ramble up the path below the hedge while I am trying to think what to write next. The good thing about writing is that you can do exactly what you like: *you can invent!* The sun can come out at night, the moon can shine by day - although they are better staying where they are. Well, I am making two years pass quickly, without any of you taking any notice. Shut your eyes *and pretend*. Can you see the seasons pass *behind* your eyes? They go very quickly don't they? First there is winter snow. After Christmas it melts and tiny shoots from bulbs begin to peep above the dark earth which has been cleared of snow. Then spring and joyful lambs are being born, and flowers coming out. Hot summer arrives next, with bathing, holidays, and so on.

By autumn most of the best of the herd had been taken away and sold in the market of Evesham town. Our farmer had taken the day off, but he had spent at least an hour, from eleven in the morning drinking beer and eating sausage sandwiches at a bar near there. That meant he was happy and when he went back to the pens he accepted anything he was offered for his horses. They had nearly all gone. *What would his wife say?* Nothing, but she could clout him over the ears, kick his shins *-and glare at him!* He understood: she thought him an idiot - and so he was, he could have earned twice the money!

When the farmer had taken the remaining poorer horses back up to the top of the hill, he looked at them. They felt guilty, and sorry for the farmer with his nagging wife. It was all their fault that they were too mangy and unsaleable. Well, there would be another market in a few weeks time as it would soon be near to Christmas.

Our pony, while waiting in her pen in the market, had kept her ears open; or her ears pricked as they say of horses. She was collecting scandal and horsey furry tales to tell the others in their field later. But what she collected this time was hardly horseplay. It concerned human fashions, and how all the rage for this autumn was a primmed up, crinkled hair style called permanent waving. Once it was done it stayed. In the advertisement photographs, or on the girls themselves, it looked daft and uncombed. But *they* loved it! Our pony did not say anything, she just gave a little snort of contempt to herself. Yet, try as she would, she could not rub these sights out of her mind. She had always wanted to be in fashion, like a circus pony, all brushed and plaited in different directions; with pearls and beads stuck into the squares on her rump, or in the twists of her tail. Ah well, far dreams; but nobody could stop her dreams, they were free.

The season increased on top of the hill. Our Pony continued to wade through the long grass, nibbling off a late blackberry or the occasional sloe berry. What she did not realise would have been obvious if she had had a river or pond in which to see herself. She hardly even knew what she looked like, only taking to heart the callous remarks of the other ponies about her straight hair.

Well, unknown to her, things were really happening. She did not realise it but as she walked through the tall grass, long sticks of burdock burrs fell off their stalks and attached themselves to her mane and tail. As they had tiny hooks on each head, they clung and stuck to her hair. All her horsey female friends curled up their top lips and neighed with a laughter of appreciation now. Within a few days she had the most modern and wonderful hairstyle; all crinkly, matted, and curly with burrs! Very soon she was taken to market: the last horse, *and the last resort!*. If she was not sold she would be sent away to some awful unknown destination that no-one talked about. So she stood there in the rain, holding her head up high, swishing her mane and tail, and longing to be bought. Her curls remained set. Soon a small brown-haired girl came by, holding her mother's hand. She squeezed it and cried out,

‘Ooh look, there's a pony with hair just like mine!’

‘You mean uncombed?’

‘No, its in fashion. She has had her hair permed just like my big sister. *I wish that pony was mine!*’ And she sucked her thumb longingly. They walked by and all around; the little girl dragging rather.

‘That crinkly pony looks so sad and lonely.’ Another walk round. It began to rain again, and the mother was talking of comforting things like tea and cakes. The child would not be diverted.

‘Let's have another look - *please.*’ So they looked.

‘*What* a fashionable pony. I'd look good riding on her back, and everyone would stare to see a little girl with crinkly hair riding on a little pony with crinkly hair too. Perhaps you could even lend us to the circus, just for over Christmas, and earn back the money you would have spent on that pony!’

Persuasive little thing. ‘What about food, stable, saddle and reins?’

‘Well, they could be my christmas and birthday presents combined.’

The short of this long story is simple. The little girl had her way and the mother paid a miserably small sum of money for the pony because the farmer had been drinking beer yet again and could no longer work out his sums. Our pony neighed with relief at being rescued, not sent away to an unknown destination - and forgotten.

This lovely little girl looked after her pony well; she brushed and combed her every day, morning and evening - so guess what? You have already guessed. Each time the child combed the mane and tail, a few more burrs fell out into her comb. As the days continued, more and more burrs surrounded the pony’s hooves and, you have guessed right again; the hair on the mane and tail became straighter and straighter without those burrs!

It did not matter. The pony looked gorgeous, she was so well cared for. The child and the pony loved each other dearly and would not be parted from each other; even for the world - or the circus! There was no need. The mother was glad her daughter had such a good companion, and often watched them together in the field. What the pony was careful *not* to do was to go back up to the top of the hill to her original field: she did not want to mess up her glossy straight mane and tail again. Funny how happiness comes where you least expect it!

LONE HUNT OF A STRANGE KIND

A small boy of three hugging his adventure, now safe.

‘If you go down to the woods today
you’re sure of a big surprise...’

Toby was having a picnic by some woods with his Mummy, Daddy, Beanie and Georgie. After filling his tummy as full as possible with sandwiches and cake, and washing all that down with fizzy orangeade, Toby decided he would see if he could still walk. Mummy and Daddy were dozing, or reading boring news that Toby could not understand. Beanie and Georgie were playing Five Stones and would not let him join in as he would just pick up their stones and throw them as far away as possible. He did not know the rules and neither Beanie nor Georgie would explain. Toby kicked the dust angrily, and was shouted at even more. So he decided to amuse himself.

Yes, with great pleasure Toby found he could still walk in spite of all the creamy cake slopping around inside him. He travelled away with his hands in his pockets. If he had been able to whistle he would have done, but he was too little. So he sighed a deep satisfying sigh and picked up a ladybird. That was very pretty with its rows of black spots on red. He tried to count the spots, but in touching them the ladybird felt frightened, walked quickly over his hand

and fell to the ground. Toby crouched down and watched as it crawled into the safety of the grass.

A little further on Toby knew his legs were tired; *he* wasn't but his legs were, so he told them that he would sit down a while and give them a rest. As soon as he was seated he thought he heard them thank him.

'That's all right, legs, I'm tired too.'

Now the sun was warming him in that special way that only the sun does after midday. Toby looked up lazily and confided,

'I know you like making people warm, especially small boys who have eaten too much.' He winked at the sun, who winked back at him with its brilliant rays. Toby moved onto his tummy and looked into the rich grass around him. He knew it was rich because there were so many things in it. Not just flowers and grass but so many moving things. He blinked, and there in front of him a shiny black and purple beetle lumbered by. He moved his hand close and the beetle obligingly crawled up. It was harmless and just tickled his fingers with its feathery legs. Toby looked at it wisely,

'I know why you are walking so slowly, old beetle. Its because you have eaten so much for lunch that your tummy is full and you can hardly move.. Like me, I suppose.' And he laughed at it so loudly that it disappeared into the next clump of grass.

Toby got up with difficulty. He was so round and deliciously plump that his clown-like body kept on trying to topple. Soon he managed to balance and started to run so that his tummy would not lean over too far. What he did not realise was that his family were now out of sight, reach or earshot. So, not knowing, he did not care and for the moment he was not bothered. Life was fun, especially in the baking hot afternoon that he was enjoying.

Within the sizzling heat he heard the whizz pause, burr stop, silence, moving in many directions in the grass. There were lots of grasshoppers playing leap-frog, no, leap-hopping together. Toby joined them jumping and hopping, and leaping after the tiny green insects in his valiant attempt to catch them. But they were too jumpy to be caught. He sulked for at least thirty seconds, then chuckled as he said to himself, and to anyone else who was listening, but of course there wasn't,

'Well, I'm a *big game hunter* so I'll hunt for *enormous* creatures now.'

What Toby hadn't noticed was that the sun had yawned, had slowly lain down and pulled a gentle dusk cover over its eyes. By this time he had wandered between close tree trunks, past pine needles and down a footpath into the distance. He kept on imagining that he saw great, exciting animals wandering in the far away scrub. There were lions and giraffes, tigers, huge birds of prey and many more. Strangely, Toby wasn't frightened at all. He was just surprised that each time the animals never came any nearer, that they kept walking further away,

‘Like shadows, I suppose,’ he said to himself sadly

By now his cream cake seemed to have vanished, his legs were heavy again and his eyes so tired that they kept trying to fall asleep as he walked. As soon as he could he found a hole behind the bottom of an old hollow tree. He called out, ‘Anyone in there, anyone at *home*?’ The tree called back, ‘Home, home...’ so Toby thought it meant he could stay for a while. He brushed a space free of pine needles with his hands and lay down. Within minutes he was drifting off into sleep.

His dreams were amazing. He could hardly believe the enormous animals he found and chased through the forest. He still didn’t catch any, but that was the way of dreams, you *nearly* do, but not quite. His were huge flying creatures, tall ones, spotted ones and slinky types that he drew away from. Then of course came every form of dinosaur. One rather affectionate one came so close that he felt its soft tongue lick - at which point Toby woke up. Sure enough there *was* an animal above him, it *was* licking his face, but it was a dog. Toby loved dogs, especially this sort which was a ‘sniffer dog,’ a golden labrador with the softest lick he had ever felt before.

As Toby moved, so the dog stood back a little and barked. That frightened our little fellow and he jumped to his feet, wondering if this strange dog was indeed friendly. The dog began to walk away, always looking over its shoulder as though beckoning Toby to follow. Fortunately it was daylight; the night had passed without Toby even remembering whether there had been a full moon, or not. He felt he was meant to follow the dog, who kept stopping and barking and then moving on again as if to show him the way. So Toby did follow his new friend.

It seemed a long way; a very long way. But in less time than it takes to write this, Toby was overjoyed. There were Beanie and Georgie running, and running to meet him, with their arms open wide to greet him. Mummy and Daddy were running close behind and they all met together in one huge family hug-a-mug! Who was more pleased, Toby to have been found, or the others for having found him? Nobody knew, because nobody asked! What they did chorus was,

‘Toby *where have you been?*’

‘I was only hunting for dinosaurs, but I got lost...’ and he began to cry. ‘No, wait a minute, I think I did find a little, tiny baby dinosaur because he is wriggling and squeaking in my trouser pocket.’ Toby pulled out a small mouse and held it so close that it squeaked even louder in a stifled, muffled, almost choking breath. Beanie rescued it quickly and Georgie was just about to tell Toby that it was only a wild *mouse*, when it lept out of Beanie’s hand and scampered away. Toby wailed. Beanie comforted him,

‘Never mind Toby, you can share my hamster.’ Georgie added, ‘And you can play Five Stones with us and help play with my trains.’

So Toby held one of Beanie’s hands, and one of Georgie’s hands and the big tears that were sitting on his cheeks dried very quickly as they all walked home together. That night Toby was

much more tired than usual. None of the family realised that when he slept he dreamed he really *was* chasing dinosaurs, and had caught a baby one: but only Toby *knew*.

THE TURTLE'S TALE

We made a TURTLE out of sand, TOBY and I. Down by the sea the tide was coming in, just as the moon told it to. TOBY'S DADDY was relaxing in one of JONATHAN'S chairs, then he settled down on a mattress with the newspaper. As daddies do, but he deserved the rest as he had been working so hard at the POTTERY.

So we, his grandmother EVE and TOBY, collected our buckets and spades and went down to the edge of the sea to create a mystery. First it started with an oval pile of sand that formed our new instant TURTLE'S back, then we continued to make the rest of her body.

TOBY announced, 'Lets dig a moat round our sea creature so that the sea can form a stream right round when the water comes in. And then, and then...' But TOBY'S words were flying into the air like the calls of SEAGULLS circling overhead with some brightly coloured KITES. He was hop-skipping into the distance with joy in each skip step.

EVE was adding the turtle's head with flippers working hard, backwards and forwards as though this was a real MUMMY TURTLE scooping out a hole for her nest on the seashore. TOBY was back and helped her to dig deeper. Then he rushed off again and brought back a few large white pebbles as stone eggs. He threw them into the hole, then picked up his bucket to collect some small ones: gravel, shells as molluscs and bivalves, sometimes piled on top of each other in a circle.

So there they were, the two of them, digging like mad to race the sea tide coming rolling in so fast. TOBY found two pieces of transparent seaweed that he put on the face for eyelids. Our MUMMY TURTLE looked out of these eyelids with blank white seashore sea-stone washed eyes. So TOBY gave her a smile on her mouth, some white teeth, a green strand of seaweed and a red seaweed bunch of hair.

They were both dancing round TOBY AND EVE. There was a line of mixed weed making a backbone rather like the crest on a DRAGON'S back or a NEWT'S spine. TOBY found a CORK from an old wine bottle which had SPAIN written on it. It became the boat's funnel. He found a stick and some seaweed as a flag like a banner and decided that this turtle was a swimming model called 'THE GOOD SHIP TURTLE' and was soon to be leaving for SPAIN.

But what was happening the other end? TOBY threw a bucket of seawater over the stone eggs to make them shine. Then he found a little girl as a friend. She was called Kaylie and was dark and pretty, wearing a pink bathing costume and also carrying a bucket and spade. Together they joined TOBY'S turtle with her CASTLE, with its windows in the sand shape and a heart made out of little stones. They dug their water channels so fast that they believed they would race the tide. Not so. OLD MAN OCEAN was a crafty fellow and did not wish to wash away their beautiful artwork. He made the tide change and withdraw, slowly and gently so that the seawater only touched the edges of their creations. Then it slid away.

So they left it. EVE told TOBY that his MUMMY TURTLE was going to lie on the sandy beach protecting her stone eggs until he was asleep and it was really, really, DARK. Then the FULL MOON would slowly lift herself out of the far ocean, shine on the beach and as the tide returned just a little higher than before, it would fill the moat with rivers of seawater surrounding the castle and the TURTLE so she would be able to float back into the sea again, leaving her stone EGGS safely covered in sand to hatch into BABY TURTLES later. The MOON shone a clear path for the TURTLE to return to the ocean. And all this was happening while TOBY lay asleep in his bed dreaming of them.

CORTINA

Starting in Venice, Josephine running away in downside Street after the boys.

Josephine: 'Maimie, Ali, wait for me!'

[Street scene lhs. Josephine in yellow dress. Zoom to corner end of street.]

[New frame. Jaimie and Ali at the far end of the cobbled square are ringing the bell of someone's flat in part of the joined houses. They look up at the top of the facade and wonder]

Jaimie: 'Quick, I think someone is looking. Yes, yes, I'm sure. You see that shadow behind the top window? I'm sure I saw it move. Yes, yes, quick Ali, we might be caught. Someone might come out of that door and, and - I hear footsteps on the stairs. Run Ali, *run for your life!* If she catches us, that witch, she might drag us in, hide us - *she might even eat us!*'

[His words follow Ali who has already started running over the cobbles to the far adjacent corner. Near the safety of escape, he flops down and crouches on the warm stones. Jaimie races to catch up, stops halfway and, peeved, put his fingers to this mouth in anxiety.]

Jaimie: 'Ali, Ali, don't be mean, don't leave me - *wait for me.*'

[Ali, still crouching, laughs and waits.]

Ali: 'Okay, okay, I wasn't going to leave you. I was just getting a safe distance. Anyway I can't see anyone opening the door, but - ah yes, there *is* the noise of a rattling of keys...'

[He jumps up just as Jaimie reaches him. Jaimie gives him a battering on his head. After Ali has flinched to half size to avoid more blows, he stands up.]

Ali: 'Oh, oh, Jaimie, *stop it.*'

[The dark emerald green door starts to open with distant but almost visible creaks. The two boys do not wait. They make a dash, they think for their lives. Round the corner they scamper. Ali well ahead, alternates speed with an elegant nonchalant skipping. He stops in mid leap, one leg poised high, laughs and makes a comical ghoulish face at his elder brother and, as Jaimie nearly catches up Ali makes a dash for it again.

The square, the door and possibilities of discovery and capture are now well out of sight. After all they only pushed that jangling doorbell for fun; a boyish prank. One of many they were always conspiring to play on someone known or unknown.

Venice is full of these long narrow streets with very tall buildings rising and almost protecting the population diminished below. It is as though the streets often repeat the mood of these canals with their greenish mould rising up bold stone walls dripping continuous water and centuries of intrigue.

[The film frames change direction now. Details of carve lintels and windows. The camera travels beyond the two boys, turns several corners and comes out into another sunlit square where Josephine is still running round and round at top speed, hoping and trying to catch up with her distant brothers now out of sight. As she runs she calls]

Josephine: 'Maimie, Ali, *where are you?*'

[After a few circles, sometimes frantic, sometimes amused, she is watched by other tourists who turn round in giddy circles to follow her path. In the centre of this square are cafe tables with their grouped aluminium silver chairs pushed tightly against each table waiting for custom. Josephine climbs onto one, and settles to look at the camera, with a sly smile on her face.]

Josephine: 'Look at what I've got - *see* on my finger!'

There is no one really around to speak to her yet. She might be talking to the sky, the birds. There is in fact an elderly man, a stranger who is obviously a Venetian Italian wandering alone. He has a beret perched carelessly on one side of his head and a dark green thoroughly worn three-quarter length coat that he holds tight to his chest. Zoom in a little. It has to be new filming here.]

Man: 'Eh, eh, buon' giorno bambina. Que nome' (sp) bella, *belisissima...*'

[Josephine looks up at him blankly; her smile fades quickly. She hides her fingers into both hands tightly as tears of apprehension begin to well up in her eyes. Of course there is a language as well as stranger barrier, and the man turns away, shaking his head in confusion. He is somewhat of a street tramp anyway, well known in the town, and often walking round the alleyways or squares on his own. When he is far enough away, Josephine looks up secretively again and talks to the leaves shivering in the small trees planted round the square.]

Josephine: 'Look at me, trees, birds - *look what I've got.*'

[She laughs, uncurls her clasped hands and opens her fingers again. At this point, perhaps zoom in to a tree branch, leaves and a small bird who cocks his head and begins a slight brief line of song.]

Josephine; 'I found it - *this*.'

[On her first finger is a bright glass ring, rather too big for her small plump finger. She spins it round and round and it sparkles as sunlight glimpses and follows it. Camera zoom in on it, and fix on transparent, amber and ruby colours. Is it real or false? How could we know, or from where she had stolen it? Was it skilfully taken from a street stall while the vendor's back was briefly turned away? Or did she find it, as an 'object trouve' on the ground? Whatever the location, she now looks down at it with pleasure and pride, caressing it with her other fingers. She bends down closer and whispers to it]

Josephine: 'You're mine, pretty thing; my little jewelled ladybird.'

[Suddenly she feels possessive, and at the same time protective. She does not know where to hide it, but knows it has to be hidden. She climbs down from the chair and turns her back, quickly lifting up the skirt of her dress. As she is only just four, when they had family excursions she had to wear a nappy inside her knickers. To keep it in place those pants had rather tight elastic round the top of her thighs. Into this security she drops her ring inside the waist elastic and feels its cold slide down to rest against the springy band of elastic round her leg. She pats her skirt down in order again, looks and is relieved to find that there are few people around, and those ones distant. No one has seen her. Just at that moment the two boys, those naughty brothers who had abandoned her, come round the tables, skipping and taunting. Josephine begins to cry]

Josephine: 'Where have you *been* Maimie, Ali? *You lost me.*' And she begins to wail.

[Zoom in camera. They come up to her and hug her from both sides. Ali dances as Jaimie gives her an affectionate bash on the head.]

Josephine: 'Ow w w... Maimie *don't*.'

Jaimie: 'Come on Jo Jo - *I would never leave you.*'

[They sidle away together, weaving between the silver tables as the camera follows their diminishing figures down another street. Camera in, then out again to show that both Jaimie and Ali are each holding onto one of Josephine's hands. Josephine, in the middle, starts to skip; then they all do. The camera backs away as they disappear around another narrow street corner.]

[The plot of the ring. Escape or discovery? Liz finds it as it drops out of Josephine's pants in the toilet, and it rolls away shining a revolving sparkle, almost into a drain. They both rush to retrieve it. Liz is worried and cross and admonishes Josephine.]

Liz: 'We'll have to declare it, take it to the police.'

[Josephine is in floods of tears. Liz relents and embraces her little daughter; after all she has only recently been three.]

Josephine 'You won't give me away to them will you.'

[She lets out a howl of anguish. Liz holds her more tightly.]

Liz: 'Look at me, look at me Jo Jo. Show me that ring. Oh, I forgot, I have it in my own hand now.'

[She opens her own hand, and in her palm lies the captured ring. She peers at it more closely (camera zoom in) then gives a big long sigh of relief. The camera close-up goes back to the ring and moves most carefully, slowly round it. There appear to be flawed ages and some tarnish.]

Liz: 'It's all right Jo Jo. It's not real, *its fake.*'

Josephine: 'What you mean, fake?'

Liz: 'It's not precious.'

Josephine, dancing up and down. 'Yes it is, *it is*' and she starts to howl all over again, the pitch getting higher as her anger takes over. 'Give it to me, *its mine*, I must have it.' She starts to paw her mother to try to grasp back the ring. Liz holds it away.

Liz 'No, Jo Jo, it may not be of real value, but it is still real and we must show it to your daddy.'

[Josephine subsides into a whimper and in a whisper she pleads. Camera close-up on tears and quivering lips.]

Josephine: 'Daddy will give it back to me - *he loves me.*'

[A challenge as she looks up into her mother's face. The camera follows.]

Liz: 'I do too darling, but the ring must go back.'

[She put it into her purse, lets Josephine go and they come out of the toilet to get back to the others who by then are waiting in the queue for the tourist boat to take them round the island. Joining the others Josephine feels better. She goes up to Nick and holds his hand.

Confidentially she tells him

Josephine: 'I got a ring, will *you* marry me!'

THE END