

Sarah Perry was born in Essex in 1979. She has been the writer in residence at Gladstone's Library and the UNESCO World City of Literature Writer in Residence in Prague. *After Me Comes the Flood*, her first novel, was longlisted for the *Guardian* First Book Award and the Folio Prize, and won the East Anglian Book of the Year Award in 2014. Her latest novel, *The Essex Serpent*, was a number one bestseller, Waterstones Book of the Year 2016 and both Fiction book of the Year and Overall Book of the Year 2017 at the British Book Awards. It was then nominated for a further eight literary prizes, including the Costa Novel Award 2017, and the Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction 2017. Her work is being translated into fifteen languages, and her essays and fiction have been broadcast on BBC Radio 4 and RTE 1. She reviews fiction for the *Guardian* and the *Financial Times*. She lives in Norwich.

Praise for *After Me Comes the Flood*

'What Perry does here is to render the suspense metaphysical, one might even say environmental: we care about her characters, as we care about the characters in a novel by Thomas Hardy, say, but it is also the case that her dramatis personae, like Hardy's, are transcended by the drama that unfolds in the land, in the air and, most of all, in the water that surrounds them . . . By the close the careful reader emerges with a sense of having encountered a unique new writing talent, already working at a level of subtlety and restraint that many more seasoned novelists lack' John Burnside, *Guardian*

'Sarah Perry's prose is, on the surface, straightforward and calm – but a great sense of depth permeates it, and a sense of frantic foreboding builds through its moments of intense colour . . . A house and the mysteries it contains; a disconcerting, dark reservoir to which everyone's attention returns, and in general a deeply unsettling sense of place – all made me think of Fowles' *The Magus*, Maxwell's *The Chateau*, and Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*. I loved it' Katherine Angel, author of *Unmastered*

‘A dark, marvellous novel . . . Perry evokes the oppressive atmosphere in precise, elegant prose . . . This mesmeric quality recalls Sebald’s writing, but Gothic-smudged . . . It is not good for a first novel, just very good full stop. So pour yourself a cool drink and bask in a dazzling new writing talent’ Catherine Blyth, *Sunday Telegraph*

‘Perry’s debut successfully creates an air of real eeriness and tension . . . the real pleasure here is in her insightful and convincing depiction of family’ Lesley McDowell, *Glasgow Herald*

‘An original and haunting book . . . a mix of elegant, alluring, but subtly sinister characters . . . a talented writer’ Christina Appleyard, *Daily Mail*

‘Just occasionally you pick up a novel that is inexplicably gripping from the first page – and Perry’s debut is one of them . . . a hypnotic performance with an understated, dream-like conviction. It is a remarkable first outing from a writer we should be hearing more of in the future’ Phil Barker, *Sunday Times*

‘Perry’s work harnesses the mythic power of religious and historical texts to lend weight and wonderment . . . she is adept at peeling back the skin to reveal a detailed anatomy of psychological motivation . . . A gripping, memorable, impressive debut’ Holly Williams, *Independent on Sunday*

‘A deeply creepy and startlingly well-written tale of religion and mystery’ Sam Byers, *Times Literary Supplement*

‘A taut summer thriller’ *Harper’s Bazaar*

‘Impossible to put down’ *Image Magazine*

‘One of my most memorable reads lately has also been one of the most enigmatic . . . a beautiful, dream-like, unsettling narrative in which every word, like a small jewel, feels carefully chosen, considered and placed. Rarely do debut novels come as assured and impressive as this one’ Sarah Waters

‘Unsettling, thoughtful, eerie . . . strange and new . . . It’s very clever and very intriguing’ Tim Pears

AFTER
ME
COMES
THE
FLOOD

SARAH PERRY



A complete catalogue record for this book can
be obtained from the British Library on request

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WEDNESDAY

I

I'm writing this in a stranger's room on a broken chair at an old school desk. The chair creaks if I move, and so I must keep very still. The lid of the desk is scored with symbols that might have been made by children or men, and at the bottom of the inkwell a beetle is lying on its back. Just now I thought I saw it move, but it's dry as a husk and must've died long before I came.

There's a lamp on the floor by my feet with painted moths on the paper shade. The bulb has a covering of dust thick as felt, and I daren't turn it on in case they see and come and find me again. There are two windows at my side, and a bright light at the end of the garden throws a pair of slanted panels on the wall. It makes this paper yellow, and the skin of my hands: they don't look as if they have anything to do with me, and it makes me wonder where mine are, and what they're doing. I've been listening for footsteps on the stairs or voices in the garden, but there's only the sound of a household keeping quiet. They gave me too much drink – there's a kind of buzzing in my ears and if I close my eyes they sting . . .

I've never kept a diary before – nothing ever happens to me worth the trouble of writing it down. But I hardly believe

what happened today, or what I've done – I'm afraid that in a month's time I'll think it was all some foolish novel I read years ago when I was young and knew no better. I brought nothing with me, and found this notebook pushed to the back of the drawer in the desk where I sit now, hidden by newspapers buckled with damp. The paper smells dank and all the pages are empty except the last, where someone's written the same name on every line as if they were practising a signature. It's a strange name and I know it though I can't remember why: EADWACER, EADWACER, EADWACER.

Underneath it I've written my own name down, because if I ever find this notebook again I'd like to be certain that it's my handwriting recording these events, that I did what I have done, that it was nobody's fault but mine. And I'll do it again, in braver capitals than my name deserves: JOHN COLE, underlined three times.

I wish I could use some other voice to write this story down. I wish I could take all the books that I've loved best and borrow better words than these, but I've got to make do with an empty notebook and a man who never had a tale to tell and doesn't know how to begin except with the beginning . . .

Last night I slept deeply and too long, and when I woke the sheets were tight as ropes around my legs. My throat felt parched and sore as if I'd been running, and when I put on the grey suit and grey tie I'd laid out the night before they fit me poorly like another man's clothes.

Outside the streets were eerily quiet, and it was the thirtieth day without rain. People had begun to leave town in search of places to hide from the sun, and sometimes I wondered if

I'd go out one morning and find I was the last man left. As I hurried to work there were no neighbours to greet me, and all the other shops had lowered their blinds. I'd imagined customers on the steps of the bookshop peering in at the window, wondering what had kept me, knowing I am never late – but of course no-one was waiting. No-one ever is.

When I let myself in I found that in the dim cool air of the shop I felt sick and faint. There's an armchair I keep beside the till (it was my father's, and whenever I sit there I expect to hear him say 'Be off with you boy!'), and as I reached it my legs buckled and I fell onto the seat. Sweat soaked my shirt and ran into my eyes, and my head hurt, and though I've never understood how anyone could sleep during the day I leant against the wing of the chair and fell into a doze.

My brother says the shop fits me like a snail's shell, and though I feign indignation to please him he's right – I've never sat in that armchair, or stood behind the till, and not felt fixed in my proper place. But when I woke again just past noon everything had shifted while I slept and nothing was as I'd left it the day before. The clock in the corner sounded ill-tempered and slow, and the carpet was full of unfamiliar birds opening their beaks at me. All the same my headache had receded a little, so I stood and did a few futile little tasks, waiting for someone to come, though I think I knew no-one would. I've never much wanted the company of others and I'm sure they don't want mine, but as I fumbled at the books on the shelves I was hoping for the bell above the door to ring, and for someone to stand on the threshold and hear me say 'How can I help you?'

I crossed the empty floor to the window and looked out on the street. I heard someone calling their dog home and after

that it was quieter than ever. For all that I've never believed it possible I felt my heart sink. It was a physical sensation as real as hunger or pain, and just as if it had been pain I felt myself grow chill with sweat. Looking for something to wipe my forehead I put my hand in my pocket, and pulled out a postcard I'd folded and shoved in there a week ago or more.

It showed a boat stranded on a marsh, and a sunrise so bleak and damp you'd think the artist intended to keep visitors away. On it someone had drawn a stick figure walking in the shallows and beckoning me in. I turned it over and saw a question mark written in green crayon, and under it the name CHRISTOPHER in letters an inch high. My brother keeps a room for me in his house on the Norfolk coast, with a narrow bed and a bookshelf where he puts the sort of novels he thinks might interest a man like me. He often says 'Come any time: any time, mind you,' but I never do, other than at Christmas when it seems the proper thing to do.

I turned the postcard over and over in my hands, and lifted it up as if I could smell salt rising from the marsh. If I went to see my brother, there'd be a houseful of good-natured boys, and my sister-in-law who seems always to be laughing, and my brother who'd sit up into the small hours talking over whisky. But I could put up with all of that, I thought, for clean air and a cool wind in the afternoon. So I took a sheet of cardboard from the desk, wrote CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE on it in as tidy a set of capitals as I could manage, and propped it in the window. Then I turned off the lights and made my way home.

I'd hoped the weather might be breaking at last, but the sky was blank and bright and my head immediately began to

ache. I let myself into my flat and packed a small bag, then left with the haste of a schoolboy playing truant. Twice I walked up and down the road before I found my car, feeling the heat beat like a hammer on the pavement, hardly knowing one end of the street from the other. When at last I saw it, the bonnet was covered in a fine reddish dust and someone had drawn a five-pointed star on the windscreen.

Should I have turned back then? A wiser man might have seen the journey was cursed – on a balcony above me a child was singing (we all fall down!) and in the gutter a pigeon had died on its back – but when I looked up at the windows of the flat they seemed as empty as if no-one had lived there for years.

It wasn't until London was an hour behind me that I realised I hadn't brought a map, or even the scrap of paper where once my brother wrote the simplest route to take. I thought I knew the way but my memory's always playing tricks, and in less than two hours I was lost. Black boards by the roadside warned SLOW DOWN and the sun began to scorch my right arm through the glass; I opened the window, but the air that came in was foul with traffic fumes, and I began a convulsive coughing that shook my whole body at the wheel.

I began to panic. My stomach clenched like a fist, and there was a sour taste in my mouth as if I'd already been sick. My heart beat with a kind of fury that repeated itself with a new pain in my head, and I couldn't move my hands on the wheel – nothing about me was doing what it ought and I felt as though I were coming apart in pieces. Then I thought I was losing my sight and when I realised it was nothing but steam coming from under the bonnet I shouted something – I don't remember what, or why – and gritted my teeth, drifting on to

a byroad where the traffic was sparse and slow. When the dark fringes of a familiar forest appeared I was so relieved I could almost have wept.

I drove on a little while, then finding shade pulled over and stood shaking on the bracken verge. The pines stooped over me while I vomited up a few mouthfuls of tea, then I sat on the verge with my head in my hands. When I stood again, feeling ashamed though nobody saw my disgrace, the pain behind my eyes receded and I heard nothing but the engine ticking as it cooled. I was afraid to drive again so soon – I needed to sit a while and rest, and though I know little enough about the workings of my car or any other, I thought the radiator needed water, and that I couldn't be too far from help.

I found I'd driven almost to the road's end, and saw ahead of me a well-trodden path so densely wooded it formed a tunnel of dim green shade. It seemed to suck at me, drawing me deeper in, so that I walked on in a kind of trance. All around I could hear little furtive movements and crickets frantically singing, and there was a lot of white bindweed growing on the verge. After a time – I don't know how long – the path became little more than a dusty track and I found myself at the edge of a dying lawn sloping slightly upward to a distant house.

How can I explain the impression it had on me, to see it high up on the incline, the sun blazing from its windows and pricking the arrow of its weathervane? Everything about it was bright and hard-edged – the slate tiles vivid blue, the chimneys black against the sky, the green door flanked by high white columns from which a flight of steps led down towards the lawn, and to the path where I stood waiting on the boundary.

It seemed to me the most real and solid thing I'd ever seen, and at the same time only a trick of my sight in the heat. As it grew nearer it became less like a dream or invention – there were stains where ivy had been pulled from the walls, and unmatched curtains hanging in the windows. Someone had broken the spine of a book and left it open on the lawn, and near the windows rose-bushes had withered back to stumps. A ginger cat with weeping eyes was stretched out in the shade between them, panting in the sun. The painted door had peeled and blistered in the heat, and as I stood at the foot of the stairs I could see a doorknocker shaped like a man's hand raised to rap an iron stone against an iron plate.

I was standing irresolute at the foot of the steps when someone pulled open the door and I heard a child's voice calling. I thought they wanted someone else, who maybe stood behind me and had followed me unnoticed all the way, but when I looked over my shoulder the path was empty and I was all alone. The child laughed and called again, and I heard a name I knew from long ago, though I couldn't think whose face it should call to mind. Then suddenly I realised it was my own name, called over and over, and the shock made me stop suddenly with my foot on the lower step. I thought: it's only the heat, and the ringing in your ears, no-one knows you're here.

The child's voice came nearer and nearer, and through the blinding light I made out the figure of a girl, older than I'd first taken her for, running down the steps towards me with her arms outstretched: 'John Cole! Is that you? It is you, isn't it – it must be, I'm so glad. I've been waiting for you all day!' I tried to find ways to explain her mistake but in my confusion fumbled with my words, and by then the girl had reached the

bottom step and put her arm through mine. She said, 'Do you know where to go? Let me show you the way', and drew me up towards the open door. The girl went on talking – about how they'd been looking forward to meeting me, and how late I was, and how glad she was to see me at last – all the while leading me into a stone-flagged hall so dark and cold I began to shiver as the door swung shut behind me.

She must have seen my pallor and my shaking hands, because she began talking to me as if I were an old man, which I suppose I am to her. She said, 'It's all right, we're nearly there', as if these were things she'd heard were said to elderly people and thought they'd do all right for me; and all the time I was saying 'Please don't trouble yourself, there's nothing wrong – I'm all right', and neither of us listened to the other.

At the end of the dark hall we went down a stone step dipped in the centre and into a large kitchen with a vaulted ceiling. I just had time to register a dozen meat hooks hanging from their chains when she dragged out a stool for me and I nearly fell on to it. The beating behind my eyes stopped like a clock wound down leaving in its place emptiness and release, as if my head had detached itself and was drifting away. It must have been a little while later that I opened my eyes to see the girl sitting opposite me, her palms resting on the table between us. She was frowning, and examining me with unworried interest. Then she asked if I wanted water, and without waiting for a reply went over to a stone sink. I saw then how mistaken I'd been – she wasn't a child after all, although she talked like one, rattling on in a light high voice without pausing to breathe or think. She was fairly tall, and her arms and legs were lean but also soft-looking in the way of a child.

She was wearing a white T-shirt with a torn pocket on the breast. Her feet were bare and not very clean, and her face was finely made, as though it couldn't possibly have grown out of a muddle of flesh like yours and mine, but must have been carved in stone. When she came back to the table she passed me tepid water in a chipped mug and I saw that her hair was the colour of amber, and so were her eyes, and her lips were almost as pale as the skin on her cheeks. It occurred to me that nothing about her was real.

She told me to drink up, although the country water tasted disgusting to me. Perhaps I grimaced, because she said, 'I know – let's have tea!' and began to run the tap. The sound of water in the stone sink reminded me why I'd come, and all over again I started to try and explain. But she wasn't listening – I might as well have been an animal she'd found on the steps. She said, 'I've got to look after you, you see. They said: make sure he's got everything he needs, and I said: I can do it you know, I'm not stupid.' I still felt light-headed and could hear bells ringing in my ears, and comforted myself with the idea that the girl, the stone sink, the kettle in her hands, were not real, nor anything at all to do with me. The cat I'd seen outside appeared suddenly on the table in front of me, moving its tail like a hypnotist's watch, and I sat following its swing. The table was scored with knife cuts and scorched with hot pans, and someone had scratched into the wood the words NOT THIS TIME.

The girl said, 'Everything's ready for you – all your things are there. I got your room ready myself. They told me off because I picked the last flowers left in the garden but I think you'll like them and besides, tomorrow they'll all be dead.'

She picked up a box of matches to light the stove, striking

too hard so the first few broke and fell with the smell of sulphur. The cat looked at me, then flattened its ragged ears and bolted. I ought really to have been afraid of the strangeness and the dark and the insistent child, and those appalling meat hooks hanging from their chains, but instead it all seemed so absurd, and so like something in a novel, that I began to laugh. I tried to swallow the laughter but it stuck in my throat and came bursting up again, so that when the girl turned to face me she must have thought I was crying, because she ran over and patting my shoulder said, 'Oh dear, oh dear, there's no need for that', which only made me laugh harder. Then she said fretfully, 'And I promised them I'd look after you, didn't I?' and started wringing her hands.

The laughter made the pain in my head so fierce that the kitchen and the girl's face were obscured by bright specks of light. I stopped suddenly and put my hand over my eyes and said carefully, 'It's just that my head hurts, you see, and my heart isn't beating right—' I clapped a hand to my chest as if I'd be able to force it back into its proper rhythm and said much too loudly, 'After all I only wanted water for the car. . .' When I tried to stand the ringing in my ears grew more persistent but also further away, as if it came from another room. The girl ran to my side and thrust herself under my arm and said, 'I think I'd better take you upstairs, don't you?' I remember looking down at the top of her head and seeing her amber hair ringed with brightness where the lights in the ceiling struck it. It was so like a painted halo that it set me off laughing again, stopping me from speaking and saying she was mistaken, and that someone else must be on their way, perhaps was there already on the doorstep, waiting for her to come and fetch them in.

Instead I let her lead me up a flight of stairs to a long corridor carpeted with thinning rugs, and it seemed to me that we passed a dozen doors before she paused at one and kicked it open, saying, 'Here we are now, there you are – you can have a sleep.' She pushed me into the room and closed the door behind me as if she were glad to have finally finished the task she'd been given, and I heard her running away down the hall.

I stood swaying on the threshold and saw in front of me a narrow bed with a peeling white iron frame and a patch-work bedspread, an empty bookshelf, and a pair of windows that tapered to a point. In a corner of the room a narrow door stood half-open, and I could see through it a bathroom tiled in blue. From a plain oak frame propped in the corner a painted Puritan with a square white collar eyed me over his Bible, and beside him there was a wooden desk and chair. In a jug on a stool beside the bed a few flowers had used up their water and slumped on their stems, and as I watched one fell rustling to the floor. At the foot of the bed was a heap of boxes sealed with brown tape. There was a large white label on each lid, and the labels all bore the same name, and the name was mine.

I don't know what I did then – I only remember seeing my name over and over, and putting my thumbs to the pain in my eye sockets to try and push it away – but I must have collapsed on to the narrow bed and fallen at once into a deep sleep.

Much later I was woken by more of that insistent ringing in my ears, but as I listened it became more and more distant until I realised it was coming from downstairs. It was like the ringing of a bell, tolling the same note, growing louder then

fading until I couldn't hear it any more. Then the single note became a peal and eventually a melody I half remembered, and I knew it wasn't a bell after all but a piano, expertly and patiently played. I stood, feeling the blood drain from my head and into my fingertips, then went to the windows to see where I was. Immediately below me I saw a stone terrace, bordered by more of those dying roses, although someone must have been watering these and a few parchment-coloured flowers clung on. Around the edge of the terrace was a stone balustrade with pieces missing, so that the barrier to the lawn was broken. In the middle of the terrace I could see a sundial on a stone column, but when I leant closer to try and see how long I'd slept I saw its blade was crooked and told two times at once.

This room overlooks land at the back of the house, and I couldn't see the forest or the path I'd taken. Below me there's a glasshouse and a terrace, then the dry lawn slopes downward for a hundred yards or so, and becomes a stretch of scrub where brambles and nettles have taken over. Beyond there (and I've never seen anything like it before) I could see a steep embankment rising to perhaps fifteen feet. Though all around it the lawn is parched and dry, the grass on the embankment is vivid green as though it's found a source of water it's too selfish to share. You could scramble up it, if you tried, although I don't know what could be on the other side. On the right, almost out of view, I could make out a folly of a building: a little red-brick tower with an arched wooden door, and a yellow light high up on a crenellated roof. It's this light that reaches me here, as bright as if someone's behind me shining a torch on the page. It looks so out of place I half expect to see a pair of knights-at-

arms come tumbling out, with the yellow light shining from the blades of their lances.

While I stood at the window, wondering how far I'd strayed from my path and how long I'd have to walk before I found my car, someone knocked on the door. I jumped like a guilty child, then the knock came again, and the girl who'd brought me upstairs put her head slowly into the room. She'd put up her hair, and the effect of that lovely face seeming to float in the dark space behind the door was so strange it stopped me from speaking. She smiled at me and said, 'Oh good, I'm glad you're awake. Dinner's ready. Are you better now? You look better. Come down, I've saved you a seat and everyone's waiting.'

It's thirty years since I conquered my stammer, but it came back then, taking hold of my tongue so that none of the words I had ready (something like: You've been so kind, but really I think there's been a mistake . . .) came out. While I stood stupidly mouthing at the air the girl in the doorway flung up her hand and reared away, because downstairs someone was calling her. She rolled her eyes at me and said, 'I'd better go. I'll see you down there – you know where to find us.' Then she slammed the door and I was left alone again.

I can't remember the last time I felt anger: I can't help thinking it's a weakness I despise and pity. But the confusion and aimlessness that had dogged me all day vanished, and were replaced by a pure burst of fury. Here at last was a moment of perfect clarity: I must be the butt of an unkind joke. I imagined conspirators laughing in a room downstairs, my brother pouring them all wine; but recalling the boxes, with my name on each, the anger gave way to unease. My memory had never been trustworthy – was there some other plan I'd forgotten –

did they know me, after all? I knelt at the foot of the bed and drew towards me a large leather bag, and the painted Puritan, spotting a sin, raised an eyebrow as I undid the straps.

What did I expect to see – my own clothes pressed and folded, the books I'd lately been reading? My pulse leapt and I flinched as if something might have been waiting to take my hand – but there was nothing inside but clothes that smelt of another man's sweat, and a few objects wrapped in plastic bags. A white label hung from the leather handle and I lifted it to the light and saw that it wasn't my name written there as I had thought, but something as different as it was the same: JON COULES, in the thick ink of a felt-tipped pen. It was repeated over all the other boxes tumbled at the end of the bed, and at the sight of it the world settled around me: I felt as though I might be coming off a long sea trip to stand on solid ground. I wasn't supposed to be here, of course I wasn't – no-one wanted me and there was no reason I should stay.

So I smoothed my hair, undid my tie and knotted it again, and went downstairs. The notes from the piano had stopped, and I could hear voices muddling in the easy way of people who've spoken so often they don't need manners any more. There was the sound of cutlery thrown down, plates passed from hand to hand and bottles knocking against glass rims. Now and then someone laughed with a sound that wasn't quite sincere, the sort that's meant to please the teller of a tale, and I followed the laughter towards the darker end of the hall where a door stood open a little, and through which spilled out light and the scent of cooked meat. I could smell along with the meat my own sweat, and I knew I looked dishevelled and foolish. But I thought I'd despise myself if I turned like a

coward and left without saying goodbye to the girl or explaining her kind mistake. So I drew in a breath that did nothing to settle my stomach, and pushed open the door.

Seated at a long table five people went on talking and eating as though they hadn't seen me come in. The table reflected the blue-grey paper on the walls, and the dim lights in the ceiling and the lamps on the sideboard were shaded in blue glass – it looked like they were dining underwater. Behind the table a pair of glass doors blurred with the heat of their bodies overlooked the terrace I'd seen from my window, and I could make out the sundial's slanted blade shining in the yellow light at the garden's end. A big moth beat its wings against a lamp and set soft shadows moving on the walls, and a painting with colours darkened and cracked in pieces showed a bearded man with a clever shy face. He was sitting at a table holding a steel ruler and a pair of compasses so large they might have been a weapon, and another moth had settled on his painted hand. At the head of the table a man rather older than me sat in an oak chair like a bishop's throne. A branched candlestick stuck up from the high back of the chair, and someone had only just blown out the candles, so that his head was wreathed in bluish smoke. He didn't seem to notice, but sat staring at his plate and drumming his fingers on the table. He too had a long beard and was so like the painting on the wall that I kept looking from one to the other and wouldn't have been surprised to see either of them turn to me and speak.

The chairs on either side of him were empty, and to his left the girl who'd welcomed me in sat spreading butter thickly on a roll. The roll was hot, and melted butter ran into the crook of her elbow. She didn't notice, or didn't

care, but went on chatting in an amiable inconsequential way I recognised as fondly as if I already knew her well. Another woman sat at the foot of the table with her back to me. She had thick grey hair fastened at the crown with a broken pencil. On the right of the man in the bishop's chair, a tall boy with black curly hair so glossy it picked up the blue light of the lamps sat turned away from me. I remember thinking how fragile and white his neck looked, with the bone at the top of his spine casting a blue shadow. He was listening attentively to a grey-haired man who leant back in his chair with an indolence I immediately disliked. The man wore a white shirt unbuttoned at the neck, and he was inspecting the nails on his left hand and murmuring quietly. The table was covered with far more food than they could possibly have needed, on chipped platters showing blurred flowers like old stains, and there were several open bottles of wine.

With my hand on the door I waited for someone to see me standing there, and the wait went on and on until I couldn't bear it any more and shoved the door so that it knocked against an empty chair. Immediately they all fell silent: a knife was dropped and hastily snatched up and the moth paused mid-flight and turned to look at me. Then the girl with the amber hair stood and said, 'Look, it's John! Look everyone, he's here!' She dashed round the table, took my hand, and pulled me further into the room. And I couldn't resist, of course – she smiled up at me as if she'd been waiting all day to have me there, as though I were something she wanted to show off. 'I told you I'd look after him, didn't I,' she said. 'Well I did, and here he is.'