

A THIN CHILD IN WARTIME

There was a thin child, who was three years old when the world war began. She could remember, though barely, the time before wartime when, as her mother frequently told her, there was honey and cream and eggs in plenty. She was a thin, sickly, bony child, like an eft, with fine hair like sunlit smoke. Her elders told her not to do this, to avoid that, because there was ‘a war on’. Life was a state in which a war was on. Nevertheless, by a paradoxical fate, the child may only have lived because her people left the sulphurous air of a steel city, full of smoking chimneys, for a country town, of no interest to enemy bombers. She grew up in the ordinary paradise of the English countryside. When she was five she walked to school, two miles, across meadows covered with cowslips, buttercups, daisies, vetch, rimmed by hedges full of blossom and then berries, blackthorn, hawthorn, dog-roses, the odd ash tree with its sooty buds.

Her mother, when they appeared, always said 'black as ash-buds in the front of March'. Her mother's fate too was paradoxical. Because there was a war on, it was legally possible for her to live in the mind, to teach bright boys, which before the war had been forbidden to married women. The thin child learned to read very early. Her mother was more real, and kinder, when it was a question of grouped letters on the page. Her father was away. He was in the air, in the war, in Africa, in Greece, in Rome, in a world that only existed in books. She remembered him. He had red-gold hair and clear blue eyes, like a god.

The thin child knew, and did not know that she knew, that her elders lived in provisional fear of imminent destruction. They faced the end of the world they knew. The English country world did not end, as many others did, was not overrun, nor battered into mud by armies. But fear was steady, even if no one talked to the thin child about it. In her soul she knew her bright father would not come back. At the end of every year the family sipped cider and toasted his safe return. The thin child felt a despair she did not know she felt.

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The Beginning

The thin child thought less (or so it now seems) of where she herself came from, and more about that old question, why is there something rather than nothing? She devoured stories with rapacious greed, ranks of black marks on white, sorting themselves into mountains and trees, stars, moons and suns, dragons, dwarfs, and forests containing wolves, foxes and the dark. She told her own tales as she walked through the fields, tales of wild riders and deep meres, of kindly creatures and evil hags.

At some point, when she was a little older, she discovered *Asgard and the Gods*. This was a solid volume, bound in green, with an intriguing, rushing image on the cover, of Odin's Wild Hunt on horseback tearing through a clouded sky amid jagged bolts of lightning, watched, from the entrance to

a dark underground cavern, by a dwarf in a cap, looking alarmed. The book was full of immensely detailed, mysterious steel engravings of wolves and wild waters, apparitions and floating women. It was an academic book, and had in fact been used by her mother as a crib for exams in Old Icelandic and Ancient Norse. It was, however, German. It was adapted from the work of Dr W. Wägner. The thin child was given to reading books from cover to cover. She read the introduction, about the retrieval of 'the old Germanic world, with its secrets and wonders . . .' She was puzzled by the idea of the Germans. She had dreams that there were Germans under her bed, who, having cast her parents into a green pit in a dark wood, were sawing down the legs of her bed to reach her and destroy her. Who were these old Germans, as opposed to the ones overhead, now dealing death out of the night sky?

The book also said that these stories belonged to 'Nordic' peoples, Norwegians, Danes and Icelanders. The thin child was, in England, a northerner. The family came from land invaded and settled by Vikings. These were her stories. The book became a passion.

Much of her reading was done late at night,

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with a concealed torch under the bedclothes, or with the volume pushed past a slit-opening of the bedroom door into a pool of bleak light on the blacked-out landing. The other book she read and reread, repeatedly, was John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. She felt in her bones the crippling burden born by the Man mired in the Slough of Despond, she followed his travels through wilderness and the Valley of the Shadow, his encounters with Giant Despair and the fiend Apollyon. Bunyan's tale had a clear message and meaning. Not so, *Asgard and the Gods*. That book was an account of a mystery, of how a world came together, was filled with magical and powerful beings, and then came to an end. A real End. The end.

One of the illustrations showed Rocks in the Riesengebirge. A river ran through a cleft, above which towered tall lumps of rock with featureless almost-heads, and stumps of almost-arms, standing amongst thrusting columns with no resemblance to any living form. Grey spiked forest tips clothed one slope. Tiny, ant-like, almost invisible humans stared upwards from the near shore. Wraiths of cloud-veils hung between the forms and the reading child. She read:

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The legends of the giants and dragons were developed gradually, like all myths. At first natural objects were looked upon as identical with these strange beings, then the rocks and chasms became their dwelling-places, and finally they were regarded as distinct personalities and had their own kingdom of Jotunheim.

The picture gave the child an intense, uncanny pleasure. She knew, but could not have said, that it was the precise degree of formlessness in the nevertheless scrupulously depicted rocks that was so satisfactory. The reading eye must do the work to make them live, and so it did, again and again, never the same life twice, as the artist had intended. She had noticed that a bush, or a log, seen from a distance on her meadow-walk, could briefly be a crouching, snarling dog, or a trailing branch could be a snake, complete with shining eyes and flickering forked tongue.

This way of looking was where the gods and giants came from.

The stone giants made her want to write.

They filled the world with alarming energy and power.

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She saw their unformed faces, peering at herself from behind the snout of her gas-mask, during air-raid drill.

Every Wednesday the elementary-school children went to the local church for scripture lessons. The vicar was kindly: light came through a coloured window above his head.

There were pictures and songs of gentle Jesus meek and mild. In one of them he preached in a clearing to a congregation of attentive cuddly animals, rabbits, a fawn, a squirrel, a magpie. The animals were more real than the divine-human figure. The thin child tried to respond to the picture, and failed.

They were taught to say prayers. The thin child had an intuition of wickedness as she felt what she spoke sucked into a cotton-wool cloud of nothingness.

She was a logical child, as children go. She did not understand how such a nice, kind, good God as the one they prayed to, could condemn the whole earth for sinfulness and flood it, or condemn his only Son to a disgusting death on behalf of everyone. This death did not seem to have done

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much good. There was a war on. Possibly there would always be a war on. The fighters on the other side were bad and not saved, or possibly were human and hurt.

The thin child thought that these stories – the sweet, cotton-wool meek and mild one, the barbaric sacrificial gloating one, were both human make-ups, like the life of the giants in the Riesengebirge. Neither aspect made her want to write, or fed her imagination. They numbed it. She tried to think she might be wicked for thinking these things. She might be like Ignorance, in *Pilgrim's Progress*, who fell into the pit at the gate of heaven. She tried to feel wicked.

But her mind veered away, to where it was alive.

Yggdrasil: the World-Ash

I know an ash, it is called Yggdrasil
A hairy tree, moistened by a brilliant cloud.

In the beginning was the tree. The stone ball rushed through emptiness. Under the crust was fire. Rocks boiled, gases seethed. Blebs burst through the crust. Dense salt water clung to the rolling ball. Slime slid on it and in the slime shapes shifted. Any point on a ball is the centre and the tree was at the centre. It held the world together, in the air, in the earth, in the light, in the dark, in the mind.

It was a huge creature. It pushed root-needles into thick mulch. After the blind tips came threads and ropes and cables, which probed and gripped and searched. Its three roots reached under meadows and mountains, under Midgard, middle earth, out to Jotunheim, home of the ice-giants, down in the dark to the vapours of Hel.

Its tall trunk was compacted of woody rings, one inside the other, pressing outwards. Close

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inside its skin were tubes in bundles, pulling up unbroken columns of water to the branches and the canopy. The strength of the tree moved the flow of the water, up to the leaves, which opened in the light from the sun, and mixed light, water, air and earth to make new green matter, moving in the wind, sucking in the rain. The green stuff ate light. At night, as light faded, the tree gave it back, shining briefly in twilight like a pale lamp.

The tree ate and was eaten, fed and was fed on. Its vast underearth mesh and highway of roots was infested and swathed by threads of fungus, which fed on the roots, wormed their way into the cells themselves and sucked out life. Only occasionally did these thriving thread-creatures push up through the forest floor, or through the bark, to make mushrooms or toadstools, scarlet and leathery, with white warts, pale-skinned fragile umbrellas, woody layered protrusions on the bark itself. Or they rose on their own stalks and made puffballs, which burst and spread spores like smoke. They fed on the tree but they also carried food to the tree, fine fragments to be raised in the pillar of water.

There were worms, fat as fingers, fine as hairs, pushing blunt snouts through the mulch, eating

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roots, excreting root food. Beetles were busy in the bark, gnashing and piercing, breeding and feeding, shining like metals, brown like dead wood. Woodpeckers drilled the bark, and ate fat grubs who ate the tree. They flashed in the branches, green and crimson, black, white and scarlet. Spiders hung on silk, attached fine-woven webs to leaves and twigs, hunted bugs, butterflies, soft moths, strutting crickets. Ants swarmed up in frenzied armies, or farmed sweet aphids, stroked with fine feelers. Pools formed in the pits where the branches forked; moss sprouted; bright tree-frogs swam in the pools, laid delicate eggs and gulped in jerking and spiralling wormlings. Birds sang at the twigs' ends and built nests of all kinds – clay cup, hairy bag, soft hay-lined bowl, hidden in holes in the bark. All over its surface the tree was scraped and scavenged, bored and gnawed, minced and mashed.

Tales were told of other creatures in the society amongst the spreading branches. At their crown, it seemed, stood an eagle, singing indifferently of past, present and what was to come. Its name was Hraesvelgr, 'flesh-swallower'; when its wings beat, winds blew, tempests howled. Between the eyes of the huge bird stood a fine falcon, Vedrfölnir. The

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great branches were pasture for grazing creatures, four stags, Daínn, Dvalinn, Dúneyrr and Duraþrór, and a goat, Heidrún, whose udder was filled with honey-mead. A busy black squirrel, ‘drill-tooth’, Ratatöskr, scurried busily from summit to root and back, carrying malicious messages from the bird on the crown to the watchful black dragon, curled around the roots, Nidhöggr, entwined with a brood of coiling worms. Nidhöggr gnawed the roots, which renewed themselves.

The tree was immense. It supported, or shaded, high halls and palaces. It was a world in itself.

At its foot was a black, measureless well, whose dark waters, when drunk, gave wisdom, or at least insight. At its rim sat the Fatal Sisters, the Norns, who may have come from Jotunheim. Urd saw the past, Werdandi saw the present and Skuld stared into the future. The well too was called Urd. The sisters were spinners, who twisted the threads of fate. They were the gardeners and guardians of the Tree. They watered the tree with the black well-water. They fed it with pure white clay, *aurr*. So it decayed, or was diminished, from moment to moment. So it was always renewed.

Rándrasill

In the kelp forests grew a monstrous bull-kelp, Rándrasill, the Sea-Tree. It gripped the underwater rock with a tough holdfast, from which rose the stem like a whiplash taller than the masts or roof-trees, the stipe. The stipe went up and up from the depths to the surface, glassy still, whipped by winds, swaying lazy. Where the water met the air the stipe spread into thickets of fronds and streamers, each buoyed up by a pocket of gas, a bladder at its base. The branching fronds, like those of the Tree on land, were threaded with green cells that ate light. Seawater takes in red light; floating dust and debris take in blue; weeds deep down in dim light are mostly red in colour, whereas those tossing on the surface, or clinging to tide-washed ledges, can be brilliant green or glistening yellow. The sea-tree grew at great speed. Strips tore away and new ones sprouted, new weed-spawn streamed from the fronds in milky clouds, or green clouds, of moving creatures

that swam free before gripping at rock. In the water-forest creatures ate and were eaten, as they were in the roots and branches of the land-tree.

The tree was grazed by wandering snails and sea-slugs, rasping up specks of life, animal, vegetable. Filter-feeding sponges sucked at the thicket of stipes; sea-anemones clung to the clinging weed, and opened and closed their fringed, fleshy mouths. Horn-coated, clawed creatures, shrimp and spiny lobster, brittle-stars and featherstars supped. Spiny urchin-balls roamed and chewed. There were multitudes of crabs: porcelain crabs, great spider crabs, scorpion and spiky stone crabs, masked crabs, circular crabs, edible crabs, harbour crabs, swimming crabs, angular crabs, each with its own roaming-ground. There were sea-cucumbers, amphipods, mussels, barnacles, tunicates and polychaete worms. All ate the wood and fed the weed with their droppings and decay.

Things swayed, and slid, and sailed through the sea-forest, hunting and hunted. Some were fish-flesh disguised as weeds – angler-fish enveloped in floating veils like sargassum, dragon-fish hanging in the water indistinguishable from frond-forms, draped in shawls and banners like tattered vegetable protrusions. And there were huge fish with bladed

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bodies, refracting light, lurking shadows in the shadows, their swaying flanks changing colour as the light streamed through the water and was sifted.

The Sea-Tree stood in a world of other sea-growth, from the vast tracts of bladderwrack to the sea-tangles, tangleweeds, oarweeds, seagirdles, horsetail kelps, devil's aprons and mermaid's wine-glasses. Shoals of great fish and small fish went by, wheeling packed globes of herring, rushing herds of tunny. There were salmon on their long journeys – chinook, coho, sockeye, pink, chum and cherry salmon. There were green turtles grazing in the fronds. There were streamlined sharks in many forms, thresher, shortfin mako, porbeagle, tope, leopard shark, dusky shark, sandbar shark and night shark, the hunters of the hunters of the hunted. Great whales tore giant squid from the depths, or opened the vast sieves of their mouths to filter plankton. Creatures built homes in the canopy as creatures built homes in the World-Ash. Sea otters constructed cradles and dangled from the fronds, turning shellfish and urchins in busy forepaws. Dolphins danced and sang, clicking and whistling. Seabirds screamed overhead and plumped like arrows into the mass of water. The water was pulled this

way and that by the sun and the moon. Tides crawled up beaches, were sucked into inlets, broke with white lacy spray on shells of rock, hurtled in smooth and rearing, or seeped and meandered in deltas.

The holdfast of the Sea-Tree was on an underwater mountainside, deep, deep down, as far as the last glimmer of sunlight or moonlight could penetrate. There were deeper things. There were creatures of the dark whose plated forms, or spiny or fleshy heads, were lit as though by brilliant lamps in the black gloom. Things that angled for prey with a fishing line of their own flesh, things whose eyes glared in the visible darkness.

At the foot of the World-Ash is the Fountain of Urd: still, cold, black water. At the foot of the Sea-Tree are vents and funnels, through which whistle steam, and spittings of molten stone from the hot centre of the earth. Here too, in darkness, worms crawl, and pallid prawns flicker glassy feelers. As the three women from Jotunheim, the Norns, sit at the edge of the fountain and feed and water the Tree, so Aegir and Rán sit in the currents that eddy about the holdfast of Rándrasill. Aegir makes music with a stringed harp and a pearly conch. Whales and dolphins hang motionless,

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sifting the singing through the echo-chambers of their heads. The sounds can act like oil on the ocean, making a dull calm, or a glistening calm, seen glassy from under, and sparking from above. There are other tunes which perturb currents, and send great tongues of water bellowing up, as high above the thin surface as the tree is above the holdfast. The mass of water, glassy green, basalt black, holds for an everlasting moment and then the crest crumbles down and drives deep again, shedding foam, and froth, and billions of bubbles of air. Aegir's wife, Rán, plays with a vast net which she loops about dead and dying creatures as they fall through the thick depths. Some say things are caught in her toils that are neither dead nor dying, but only entranced by the welling sound. What she does with the bones and baleen, the skin and scrags, is not known. It is said that she plants them in sand, to feed what crawls and creeps under it. It is said that she collects the very beautiful – a luminous squid, a sailor with thick gold hair, blue eyes and a lapis earring, an errant sea-snake – and arranges them in a weed-garden, for the pleasure of staring. Those who see her see nothing else, and do not return to describe her.