

All the Days I Did Not Live



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1

Yesterdays I dreamed of that taste again. I dreamed of a deferential early summer. A kind breeze. I had taken the unripe and forbidden pear from the grass in the orchard. For a few moments, I sat cradling it as he watched. He had a camera and a scowl. In my dream, as on that hot day in the orchard, I lifted my chin and scowled back: it was the first time. Then I held the pear up, while his eyes said *Do not dare*; I held it up still further, before plunging it down to my mouth, biting into it lasciviously, though indeed it was unripe.

As I said, it was the first time – the *first time* I had defied him – and in many dreams through my girlhood and all the way to middle age, and now, that dream comes back. I remember the sweet scratch of summer grass, wet, ardent on my bare feet. I am a teenage girl, shoulders back, the tart juice dripping down my chin. It is slightly obscene, and that is how I meant it. He does not move, and I think now, *I can do anything*. I feel, in defiance, that I am fully alive.

To this day a pear must be unripe, but yielding enough, and there must be juice, not only moisture. I must catch it at the right moment, if I can.

Yesterday I dreamed of that taste again. Of that time. Of my one invincible summer.

I dreamed at night, and then again when I awoke. Before I went to sleep, I thought I heard a drumming sound. *I am used to that sound*, I said to myself. Stress, anxiety: the blood pulsing and whooshing in your ears, then an irritation of tap, tap in your head, pinprick in your eye and a band snapping at your temples.

But you see, I was wrong about that. And right before I drifted off, with thoughts of that pear, the drumming sound was in the walls and under my bed.

I am alive. I am fully alive.

2

‘M y love, my love. Are you there?’

There is a pause, rich in expectation. And to Alec, it feels desperate.

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘Of course, my darling, of course.’

Silence.

She waits. Darkly immoral, jubilant: full of life in a way that is new.

‘But – but how?’

‘Because you called me.’

‘It – it’s impossible... Hélène... My love... I – I buried you.’

3

As they walk down the aisle of the church, shouldering Gabriel, Catherine thinks of what a good man he is; he was. It's a stern weight on them all, on the boys. Her daughter. They have been very brave, and he was a good father to them.

The children read a poem in sections – the same one, they discovered, that their parents had had at their wedding. Gabriel had said, *I think it would be fitting and your mother would like it.* Catherine had not wanted it read again without him beside her; it felt wrong, but more wrong to say anything. Now she looks above the altar, above the coffin, averting her eyes for a moment, at the angels on the nave wall, recently and beautifully restored – ‘Resurrexi Et Adhuc Tecum Sum’, ‘I have risen and am with you still’ – then realises that one of the boys is looking at her, an expression of embarrassment – was it? – in his eyes. She is not looking where she is supposed to, but is instead tracing the gold and burgundy, not the humdrum yellow pine of the coffin and the lilies that

she had always hated. Catherine grasps she has done something inappropriate and turns away from her angelic company to the procession out of the church, the vicar ushering her forth. Time to go, walking down the same slightly tatty red carpet she had trodden on her wedding day. Something odd: knocking, or a drumming. Perhaps it is Gabriel, against the wood. She grimaces.

Resurrexi Et Adhuc Tecum Sum.

‘You are now man and wife.’

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed.

Outside she cries. *We are so sorry for your loss. So, so sorry, Catherine. Gosh, you are so upset. You poor thing. It’s a hard blow.* But Catherine cries because she feels a rush of emotions, and mostly because she feels lonely: not given to introspection because there was never time, and she had never thought she had much emotional depth – or instinct. That she did not feel as she thought she should isolated and frightened her. That hefty weight of expectation on her. She just wants to go home, but she does as she must. *That is who I am – who we were*, she thinks.

We had our wedding poem. The Donne.

Why have I no choice? Why did no one ask me whether I wanted to read it? Gabriel is not here, she thinks, and starts mouthing the poem, feeling it come into rhythm,

into shape, realising she's saying it aloud, growing in volume, crying more.

She misses him so much. I think Mum better go and sit down.

'I wonder by my troth, what thou and I
Did, till we loved?'

Then she thinks, *But what did I do before Gabriel? Was I anyone?*

She remembers the wedding poem.

I wonder by my troth, what thou and I
Did, till we loved? Were we not weaned till then?
But sucked on country pleasures, childishly?
Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers' den?
'Twas so; but this, all pleasures fancies be.
If ever any beauty I did see,
Which I desired, and got, 'twas but a dream of thee.

Then she says aloud, 'When I die, I want the cathedral, not this place. I want scale. I want tea afterwards at Wiston House. In front of the Van Dycks. That is what I want.'

You take Mum. She needs to sit down. Quickly.

There is a little book on the pew where Catherine had been sitting. It had not been there before. *Poems of John Donne.* It falls to the floor, as if driven by an unseen hand.

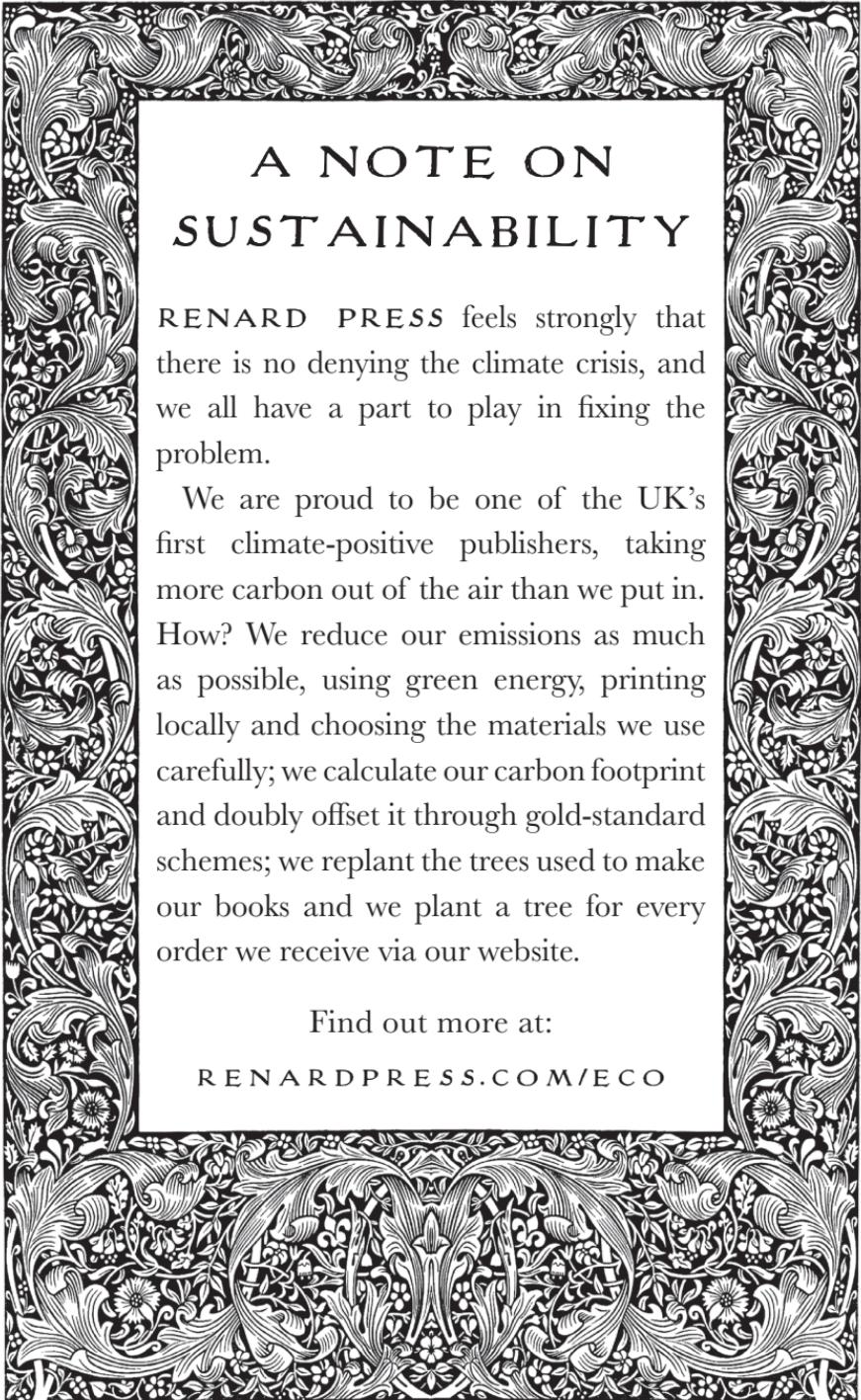
There was a time – a day, really – when Catherine was strong, and all points radiate out from this. She is thinking about it all now. A redolently warm April; she is wearing summer clothes. Her hair is auburn; she wears lip gloss and an odd outfit which feels just right: a green vest and blue-striped, white pedal-pusher trousers. Bare feet. She is standing in the orchard, and her father takes a picture of her. Ignoring who is behind the camera, she can feel strong and free. A pear drops on the ground not far from her foot and it is perfect. Her father says that it is not ripe and not to bite into it, but she does so anyway. Catherine is beautiful; she is strong, and she can do anything. It cannot be taken away from her. Bees, clover, a damson tree she climbed as a child, an old wall, honeysuckle, permeable boundaries between gardens which never seemed to matter: there is an open world about her.

Later her father shows her the photo. ‘Look at you. Just after that you ate that pear, and I bet it was hard and woolly. *Typical.*’

Oh, but it wasn’t. It was nectar, that pear. It bit back, resisted; it was its own world. She thinks about how she looks beautiful and free. Nothing can take that. It was one invincible summer. But one is all it takes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Anna Vaught is an Anglo-Welsh secondary English teacher, creative-writing mentor, editor, occasional lecturer, and the author of eleven books across form and genre, including the novels *Saving Lucia* and *The Zebra and Lord Jones* and the short fiction collection *Famished*. She was educated at the universities of Cambridge, Bristol and York St John, and is the mother of three sons. Her shorter and multi-genre works have been widely published in journals, magazines, anthologies and the national press. She has been a columnist for *Mslexia* and *The Bookseller*, and a feature writer for various outlets. Passionate about access and inclusivity in the arts, Anna curated the Curae Prize for writer-carers and campaigns actively for access in the creative industries and for young people's mental health provision. She is also a much in-demand teacher and mentor in creative writing, including with Jericho Writers. Anna has a keen interest in cultural and political history, the reception of cultural artefacts, memoir, languages and the supernatural. Her recent doctorate is a ground-breaking study exploring the links between intergenerational and developmental trauma, the imagination and magical realism. Forthcoming work includes an expanded teaching series arising from her bestselling book *The Alchemy* (Hay Press), and three works of literary fiction with Liverpool Literary Agency are in progress. At the time of writing Anna is helping Gazan undergraduates to complete their degrees and apply for graduate study and scholarships abroad, a role she hopes to expand. You can find her everywhere as bookwormvaught.



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