THE WEST COUNTRY TRILOGY

TIM PEARS

THE WANDERERS

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Disputed Land

In the Light of Morning

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The Horseman

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The Lord said, 'When you till the ground,
it shall no longer yield to you its strength;
you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on
the earth.' Cain said to the Lord, 'My pun-
ishment is greater than I can bear. Behold,
thou hast driven me this day away from the
ground; and from thy face I shall be hidden;
and I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on
the earth, and whoever finds me will slay me.'

Genesis, 4: 12–14

Principal Characters

Leopold (Leo) Sercombe

Arthur, Lord Prideaux, owner of the estate
Charlotte (Lottie) Prideaux, Arthur's only child
Lady Prideaux, Arthur's grandmother

Duncan, Lord Grenvil, Arthur Prideaux's friend
Maud, Lady Grenvil, Duncan's wife
Alice Grenvil, Duncan and Maud's daughter

Adam Score, Lord Prideaux's valet
Gladys Sercombe, cousin of Leo, Lottie's maid at the big house
Herb Shattock, Lord Prideaux's Head Groom
Sidney Sercombe, Leo's brother, under keeper on the estate
Ingrid Goettner, Lottie's German governess
Alf Satterley, gardener at the big house
Patrick Jago, veterinary surgeon
William Carew, Lord Prideaux's estate manager

Gentle George Orchard, gypsy boxer, and his wife Rhoda
Samson and Kinity Orchard, George's parents
Gully Orchard, gypsy horseman, Samson's brother
Edwin and Belcher Orchard, George's brothers
Henery Orchard, Edwin's son
Levi Hicks, gypsy horse dealer

Arnold and Ernest Mann, mine owners

Cyrus Pepperell, mean farmer, and his wife Juliana
Vance Brewer, shepherd
Wilf Cann, stockboy

Rufus, hermit tramp

Florence Wombwell, duck breeder on the estate

Part One

FLOWERS

Lottie, June 1912

The girl walked down the wide staircase, through the house all the way to the cellars. She marched along the dank gloomy corridor then climbed up the steps into the bright glare of the glasshouse. The sun was high in the sky. Lottie walked out into the kitchen garden.

What is anger?

It is a fire, smouldering. Memories are pinches of gunpowder thrown into the flames, they ignite and explode. A person's mind, bellows breathing, seething in and out.

The girl strode across the terraced lawns and on through the jungle. She hoisted her long skirt and clambered over the fence and marched across the field. Her passage disturbed bullocks there. It made the beasts frisky. Perhaps it was the dark red of Lottie's skirt. Or perhaps they detected her preference for horses, and affected the spry skittishness of colts. She fancied that they cantered here and there for her approval, clumsily kicking their heels, but they were awkward lumpen creatures, and their ambulation held no beauty. Clouds billowed in the sky and blocked the sun.

Or . . .

Anger is ice, at the centre of a snowbound waste. The frozen core of a heart and nothing will melt it, ever.

Lottie walked through the wood until she came to an area of coppiced hazel. There she slowed and scanned the ground. Soon she found what she was looking for: the wild flowers that resembled nettles at a lazy glance but did not sting. Yellow archangel. A dead-nettle with primrose-yellow flowers, it was easy to pass it by unremarked. You had to look closer to appreciate that each flower was shaped like an angel, its hood curved like a pair of wings.

Lottie picked half a dozen. She possessed little knowledge of flora, but had inherited a notebook in which her mother had pressed certain flowers, and added her drawings and observations, and these wild flowers the girl had committed to memory. The year inscribed in the front of the book was 1894. Lottie calculated that her mother had been two years older at that date than she herself was now. It stated in the notes that archangel was edible. 'Mixes nicely on the tongue with tomatoes and cheese,' according to the young Beatrice Pollard. Lottie sniffed the plant. Both flowers and leaves gave off an acrid smell. She walked on out of the wood.

Anger is pain. It is like some miserable affliction, a headache or gripe of the stomach, except a cure for it is something to be resisted. Rather, the pain should be nurtured.

'Thou didst march through the land in indignation. Thou didst trample down the nations in wrath.'

The girl strode on beside the stream. On a grassy slope rising from the opposite bank she saw a purple rash in the

green grass. A patch of bugle. Another dead-nettle, its flowers a paler mauve than the leaves and stems. In the gloomy afternoon she stood and watched a bumblebee working the patch, floating from flower to flower, buzzing in close like some hovering inspector. In search of nectar. But then drops of rain appeared on the water. If you watched closely each drop seemed not to fall from above but to rise up from beneath the surface. Lottie stepped over the stream and plucked six stems, and walked on.

In the meadow, she found to her surprise some last surviving fritillaries. Their purple chequered bells or heads hung on the tall slender drooping stems, like lanterns. She picked a few. She knew they would not last long once snapped from their roots or pulled from the soil, but they did not need to.

At the side of the lane into the village she spotted meadow cranesbill. Most of the flowers on each plant were still enclosed but some had opened, the five petals forming a shape like a saucer or plate. They were violet-blue, and marked with pale veins radiating from the centre, like paths, to draw the bees in.

In the yard Lottie did not seek a jar but laid the flowers directly upon the earth and kneeled down before the stone.

The vicar came out of the door to the church and stood in the porch looking out at the rain mizzling in the graveyard. He did not see the girl at first. He had been given an umbrella by his brother, but on the rare occasions he remembered to take it with him the rain inevitably held off. Usually he did not think of it, and the rain caught him out.

Then he saw the girl, kneeling at her mother's grave. He stepped out of the porch and walked over.

'Miss Charlotte,' he said.

The girl looked up. The Reverend Mr Doddridge loomed over her. He was an unnaturally tall man, lean and bony but broad shouldered. He had white hair and whiskers, and craggy features. He issued grim warnings from the pulpit, scolding his congregation, and when the readings were of Old Testament prophets Lottie pictured them as being much like him. She suspected that he had spent years wrestling with temptation in some desert place before coming to this hidden parish in the West Country. The rain did not appear to bother him.

'I was speaking to my mama,' Lottie said.

The vicar pondered the girl's statement. 'I am sure she hears you,' he said.

Lottie nodded. 'I told her that I do not believe she would have allowed it to happen.'

The vicar said he did not doubt it. He said that the rain was falling more heavily, Miss Charlotte was welcome to come to the vicarage. Mrs Dagworthy would give her hot chocolate and cake. A boy could be sent to the Manor for her father's gig to fetch her. Lottie said that she was grateful but would prefer to stay a moment longer here alone, then make her own way home.

'Mama may be able to hear me, Mr Doddridge,' she said. 'But can she help me?'

The vicar opened his arms, hands outstretched with palms up, as if to catch the rain. He looked at a loss. 'Only the Lord can help us,' he said. 'If we trust in Him.'

The girl thanked the priest. He nodded and walked away through the graveyard.

Lottie did not stay much longer. She put her hands to the ground and pushed herself up. She turned and walked away, as if to collect her thoughts from somewhere she had dropped them. Then she came back. She looked down at the flowers. Already they were wet and wilting, their pale colours fading. She should not stay.

'You know I have a governess, Mama,' she said. 'Ingrid. I have told you of her before. Oh, she is not so bad. I might have exaggerated her defects. But do you know what she told me? Something that she had read. "If we lose those we love, where shall we seek them? Where shall we find them? In heaven, or on earth?"'

Lottie sighed, and nodded to herself. Then she turned and walked out of the yard, through the lychgate and into the lane, and back towards her father's estate.

Part Two

A SLAVE

I

Leo, June 1912–May 1913

The boy stumbled in the night over dark earth. The land was silver. His steps were heavy. At first light in the waters of a stream he cleaned the charred red mud off his boots, and limped on in a kind of crouch that seemed best to allay the pain that racked many parts of his body. He saw where the sun rose and headed in the opposite direction, hunched over like someone with secrets from the light. He opened gates and closed them quietly behind him. He skulked close to hedgerows though on occasion he crossed pasture from one corner to its opposite. A herd of Ruby Reds chewed the cud and watched him. Where beasts were, so were men, and he wished to pass unseen. In the undergrowth of a copse he made himself a den in which he curled up and slept.

When night fell Leo Sercombe rose and trudged toward the smudge of light left on the western horizon. He struggled up onto and across the moor, every step another into the unknown as he went beyond the limits of the world he knew. Exmoor was less peopled than the farmland and he was glad to reach it, but there was less cover. When he was thirsty he lay beside the

moorland streams and lapped the cool water like a dog and filled his belly.

In the evening of the third day he picked bilberries and gorged himself on them, his fingers stained purple and doubtless his lips likewise, still swollen from the beating he'd taken.

In the night he saw flickering phosphorescent lights. They seemed to beckon or entice him. He knew they were not real but could not help himself and began to follow them. These were will-o'-the-wisps, that lead men into swamps. He turned from the sight and hurried away.

Some time during the night of the fourth day the boy came down off the moor. In the village of Hawkridge nothing stirred as he passed through it but dogs watched him. He plodded through a stand of dead trees, bark-stripped, branches snapped, trunks like bleached white bones.

In a field a flock of pale grey sheep parted for him, bleating. At dawn he crawled into a hedge and slept.

Passing by elder trees, Leo scoured the lanterns of berries and stuffed them into his mouth. He could scarce eat enough to quell his hunger, yet in due course his belly griped and doubled him over. Soon enough he had to squat repeatedly, then wipe his arse with leaves. He needed substance, fodder, but there was none.

In a conifer plantation he came across anthills. These he excavated with his hands, fingers pressed together to form two trowels, and ate the eggs. Ants bit him relentlessly. He ate them too, crunching and swallowing, trusting that survivors of his teeth would drown

before they bit his guts. The furious insects scurried up his trousers, along sleeves, under his shirt. When the boy lumbered away his bruised skin throbbed in a hundred places. A vagabond upon the face of the earth. In showers of rain he trudged through the darkness, unsure of his direction.

In the day he dreamed of bread and heard others pleading for it, and woke to hear buzzards crying above him, young ones abandoned by their parents to fend for themselves. '*As a bird that strays from her nest so is a man that strays from his home.*' On occasion on his voyage he spotted human figures and averted his eyes, so that for him they did not exist. Once he heard someone yell, 'Hey! Boy!' He altered his course and stumped along.

In a wood early one morning Leo came across a circle of feathers of some nameless bird. What had killed it? A sparrowhawk? His brother Sid would know. He picked up a single feather. The quill was made of material akin to a human fingernail. He stroked and stretched the delicate blade. It was not possible to comprehend or even to glimpse inside the mind of He who had created such a feather, for the wing of a bird that had flown in the sky. Then been destroyed by another.

The boy chewed the stems of dandelion and grass but they gave him little sustenance. He grew more famished. When before dawn he woke and the darkness became less dense he could not understand what was happening. What was light for? What was its purpose? He rose and drifted into the morning. He picked a blackberry and paused to study it. The berry

was composed of a cluster of sacs. Inside each one was the seed for a new plant, swimming in a purple seminal fluid. The berry held unfathomable mysteries. Unable to reach them, in the end he ate it.

How the boy knew that the trees watched him and wished to speak with him he was not sure, it just became self-evident. He felt a kinship to a smooth-trunked young beech and stood before it, stroking it as he would the shoulder of a horse. He told the tree it was a fine specimen, and he would like to linger, to climb in its branches, but he had to press on for his destination was a town called Penzance.

*

One morning the dew revealed spiders' webs strung between branches, tall grasses, across hedgerows. They were like nets cast by fishermen, not of water but of air. Some were such perfect wheels of silk they might have been woven by the designer of the world Himself. Most were not. They had holes, gaps, panels of differing lengths or shapes. Bodge-jobs. Like people, some spiders were more competent than others. As he tramped, the boy pondered this truth with startled wonder.

On the night of the seventh or eighth day he was traipsing through a wood when a sound stopped his heart. He stood stock-still. Someone not far away from him was suddenly wailing. A grief-stricken howl. In the darkness he imagined what beast it might be and stood trembling. Then he realised. A dog fox was calling to his mate, for she answered with her own otherworldly shriek.

Leo's hunger abated intermittently and he forgot it. Then it returned. At dawn he entered a field of cows, their udders heavy. Even if a cow would allow him to milk her, he had no receptacle. But he had to try. He crept under their bellies, between their hooves. Any one of them might kick him, as such a beast had done to the stockman Isaac Wooland. Through malice or fright or unknowingly. He came up beneath the swaying udders of a red cow and took one of her teats in his mouth, and began to suck. She did not kick or buck him off, but walked slowly away. Leo hung on, waddling on his haunches. The cow stopped and he resumed, but he could not make milk come. There was merely a tantalising taste of it on his tongue. He grasped the teat and squeezed and pulled at it, and some drops of milk fell upon the grass. He put his mouth open below the teat and the cow walked on. He held on for a few steps but she continued and he let go and lay head down on the grass, until the herd had ambled around him and away. Then he clambered to his feet and limped on. The morning air was straggled with mist, as if odourless fires had been lit in the night. The sun rose and poured orange through the smoky light.

The landscape was open and rolling, with larger fields than he was used to, and he kept close to the thick long hedges of blackthorn and holly.

He slept in the day and walked at night. His head throbbed. He trudged a short distance then found himself sitting down, and waited until the coloured spots dancing on the inside of his eyelids had ceased, then staggered to his feet and stumbled on a little

further. The boy licked dew from wet grass. He knew not where he was, only that he was a vagrant, destitute.

In the afternoon he sat under the hedge of a cornfield ripe for harvesting and watched swallows skim the surface. Gliding and dipping in their flight. They did not touch the corn nor did they rise higher than a few feet above but soared through this narrow layer of air. A realm shared with the insects they hunted. Leo did not know what day it was. He decided it was Sunday. He watched the swallows for as long as he would have been in church, this his open air Evensong.

The boy rose and walked on but took only a few paces. He felt his head fill with a light wind. The hedge and the cornfield attempted to take to the air as birds did and wheeled about him, and the earth embraced him with a thumping hug.

*

'Look, he's took a hammerin.'

'He's a scrap of a lad.'

'Aye, leave him.'

'I'll not leave him,' said a quiet voice.

Waking, Leo kept his eyes closed. There were three of them, at least.

'There's nothin to him.'

'No, he's worth nothin.'

'No,' said the woman. 'He's not worth it. Leave him, George.' She walked away.

'He's a scrap of a lad,' said the quiet man. 'I'll not leave him.'

Leo waited for them to go away and let him be.

'He's near dead as dammit,' said the older man. He walked away, following after the woman. 'Leave him, George,' he called back.

'I'll not.'

The boy felt huge hands sidle beneath him and lift his bony form. He was carried, and fell asleep again in this giant's arms. When he woke he was being put in some cart or waggon. He rolled into deep sleep. Then he woke and was given warm milk by a woman, and boiled carrot mushed like the sop for a baby. He was aware of many eyes watching him.

On the days following Leo was fed by children. They plaited his hair as he lay there, and scrawled tattoos upon his skin. Little by little his strength returned.