An Equal Stillness

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Extract

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Write the life, they urged me, even at her graveside; no one but you should do it. Who better? You with your command of words, and besides, you were the closest.

At the graveside. I remember. The varnished wood that would not have pleased her, the stiff fan of lilies and white roses. Kaspar in his velvet-collared overcoat; Patrick relying on a stick to shore him up. There were few others in the churchyard on that January morning, looking down into a surprisingly deep hole. Roddy and Louella MacNamara, Margaret Metcalf, Elizabeth Foy, my brother and my sisters with their children. The sun was shining but a stern wind scythed into us off the encircling moors. Later in the year there would be a service at St Martin-in-the-Fields to which those who did not mourn but would remember her could come. This handful of people by the fresh-dug grave were the ones who felt they had to make the journey up to Litton Kirkdale, the ones bound up in Jennet Mallow's life rather than her art.

And here's the thing. Life or art? A catalogue raisonné of Mallow's work will be ready for publication within the year, there are already several monographs and catalogues in print. These list and detail Mallow's paintings; what more need anyone know? Her life, like most lives, was in public

uneventful but in private, like everybody else's life, marked by the most significant events – birth and love and loss and death. Unlike everybody else, however, Mallow was an artist, and her art was the yield of lived experience. Her upbringing, her family, her friends, her influences, the places where she lived and the way she lived in them, all formed the ground from which her painting grew. If her painting is important – and the consensus is that she was one of the most important artists of the last century – then so is her experience, and that is what justifies this biography.

Or, rather, what justifies it to me, and those who kept insisting that I write it. God alone knows what Mallow herself would have thought. She was a very private person, reticent to an extreme, and she always held that an artist's history, except in the widest sense of social context, was irrelevant to her work. She refused all blandishments to write about herself, and although she did keep notebooks, letters and occasional journals, they were not for broadcast. On the other hand, even when she must have known that she was dying, she did not destroy them.

No, I cannot be sure this book would have her imprimatur. But I do know that it would have been written by someone in the end, and that she would rather it were by me than by a stranger. A biographer who had never met her could not expect to understand the particular pressures on the life she lived as well as one who shared it. Which is not to say I cannot be objective. Mallow's part in that tragic death for which she was condemned can be explained but not excused, and I have had no recourse to whitewash. More than an outsider might, I saw her many failings. But I also saw her strengths, and the steadfastness with which she followed her vision.

If I could, I would not have written Mallow's life, I would have painted the woman herself. It was Virginia Woolf who

said, 'Not in our time will anyone write a life as Sickert paints it.' Leaving Sickert aside, but considering great portraits – Giovanni Bellini's *Doge Loredan*, El Greco's *Fray Hortensio Félix Paravicino*, Mallow's *David Heaton* – one knows this to be true. Painters convey the souls of the long dead across the bridge of years to a hundred thousand watchers who knew nothing of them. But as I could never have painted Jennet Mallow I have tried my best with words, and to do her justice I have sometimes taken liberties with them. I am a poet by training and a poet, like a painter, has access to allusion. It will be clear to the reader that I have imagined Mallow's thoughts and feelings when I could not have known them. In my defence I can only plead that I had no choice, if the picture I would make of Jennet Mallow were to be rich, intense and full of colour, not an outline sketch. And when I invented what she might have thought, I did it, unlike a stranger, with honesty and love.

Jennet Selina Mallow was born on 11 November 1924 at the rectory of Litton Kirkdale in the upper valley of the river Aire. It was not the home her mother had envisaged when she married Richard Mallow. Then, in 1917, he was a good-looking man in uniform, a regular army officer, grave with the dignity conferred on him by experience of war. Stiff cloth and high leather boots as gleaming as a horse's eye, and a fresh scar on his forehead. The scent of lime in his already greying hair. Lorna was eighteen, and in exile from the place that she called home – the Blue Mountains of Jamaica, where her father had grown coffee until he died, when she was just thirteen, in an accident at sea. Lorna's brother, Harold Rhys, was in his last year of school in Dorset at the time of their father's death and Lorna, with her mother, went to stay there, temporarily she believed, to convalesce from grief. But only two years later Harold was killed at Ypres, and his death robbed Lorna of her homecoming and the plantation of its heir. Lorna's mother, doubly bereaved, had no desire to go back to Jamaica, but preferred to stay in Sherborne, where her sister lived. Lorna, still a child, could not be expected to manage the plantation on her own and there were no other children. So the house and lands were sold at no profit, and Lorna, fatherless and brotherless, adrift and

mourning, met Richard Mallow at a Christmas party and decided that as a door marked exit he would do.

They were married when Richard was next on leave, and Lorna was a soldier's bride at a time when other brides, and mothers, sisters, daughters too, prayed their men would live. Lorna did not expect Richard to survive. The other men in her life had not. She placed a photograph of him on the table by her bed in her mother's house in Sherborne, and she waited there for widowhood. She supposed that when it came, she would be independent and could at last go back to the Blue Mountains.

But the war came to an end and then Richard was home and inexplicably set against staying in the army. His father had been a major-general and Richard was predicted to enjoy the same success. Instead he made his mind up to become a priest. In 1923 he was ordained. Lorna, still perplexed by Richard's immortality, and by then the mother of a child, Barbara, consoled herself with thoughts of clerical preferment. A life at Lambeth Palace, golden-headed sons and vases full of crimson roses: that might be one way out of provincial dullnesses and boredom, even at the cost of exile from Jamaica. Or Richard might be made the bishop of Kingston. But Richard himself had no such dreams. He asked only for the humble living at Litton Kirkdale, and in an unwise moment of candour he told Lorna that he hoped to die there.

Litton Kirkdale. This parish of squat houses, a church almost indistinguishable from the stones around, the little congregations, shepherds, shopkeepers, the round-faced children with their impenetrable dialect, and the vast surrounding space, the overarching sky. But a place too of extraordinary light and radiance, an ancient house whose grey stone walls echoed the walls that rose up across the dales above it, where the water of the river which ran

through the rectory garden mirrored the pale-dove light of early morning and the lilac gentleness of evening too. Quietness and open spaces; some comfort there for Richard's soul. Lorna said she hated it for the cold and rain, but something in it must have caught her, even against her will, for when her second child was born she named her after a waterfall which spangled from the limestone cliffs a mile or so away. A name that Lorna also knew from gravestones in the village churchyard, the name of the fairy queen who lived in a cave behind the waterfall where, on summer days, Lorna Mallow recaptured sometimes the scent of green and water on warm rock which was for her the scent of childhood.

Rock. The colours of it, life of it, its textures and its temperature. Warm when it has sunshine stored, ice-cold in the winter. Jennet Mallow thought of rock the first winter that she spent in London, when she was twenty-one. London seemed to her a stony city. Beautiful in the vertical white lines of the houses by Hyde Park, the flat grey ribbons of the streets and the stark plane trees. But that winter it was very cold and the streets were scarred with spaces where the bombs had flattened houses; black gaps in otherwise white jaws. The faint flame of the gas fire in the hostel where she lived made no impression on the chill and damp. Her knuckles red and chapped and swollen. She remembered a winter she had spent as a young child, recovering from diphtheria. The acute boredom of hours alone in her bedroom. But then the consolation of a fire that for once in a parsimonious house was left to burn all day. Peggy came with a scuttle full of coal and little twigs of kindling and swept the tired ashes up and laid the fire and lit it. And the minute that she left the room and closed the door behind her, Jennet darted out of bed, nipped the half-burnt sticks out of the fire

with small brass tongs, and dropped them on the red-tiled hearth to cool. Then she drew with them on the white-washed wall behind her bed, behind its tall mahogany head-board, where there was just space enough for her to stand.

Dark grey lines and shading on the clean white wall: trees and birds and mountains. She could not see her drawings whole, it was too cramped there, squashed behind the wood; but she could feel them, and she knew they lived. In the night she dreamed of them, or pictured them, if sleep, as it so often did, eluded her. Lying in the utter dark, when there was no moon and the fire had long since died, she saw her drawings move. A great cat stretching out its claws, a skein of geese, a forest of pine bowed by the wind, a swiftly running river.

The flip side of the hearthrug was a mop to wipe her fingers on, and to clean the wall with, but when Peggy found the mess and the soot marks on her sheets and nightdress, she was angry. I'll tell your mother on you, she said. You wicked child. Her mother was angry too, but a few days later she bought Jennet a box of coloured pencils, a block of paper and a board to rest the paper on. Jennet did not draw in secret after that, but always she remembered the magic of those hidden lines in the cave behind her bed, and walking in the wintry city she saw them once again: stark uprights dark against the skimmed-milk whiteness of the sky, the black silhouettes of birds.

The black silhouettes of birds. It was a bird that Jennet Mallow was drawing when she met David Heaton in the life room at the Kensington School of Art in January 1947. A dead bird, a taxidermic relic of the past. She did not know what kind of bird it was, a goldfinch perhaps; its age-faded feathers gave it an indeterminate and melancholic look. It

was not the bird she wished to draw. In her mind were eagles, condors, wild birds with fantastic spans of wing, soaring over boundless plains, startling shy animals, bending the long grass beneath them with a downrush of cold air as they swept past. Later she would paint these birds, but now on the classroom wall was a print of Ruskin's kingfisher, perfectly observed, and in front of Jennet was this sad dead thing on a wax-coated twig, and every one of Henry Coldstream's students must first prove to him that they could draw. Jennet banished her great birds of prey and drew as carefully as she could the tilted head, the little beak, the angle of the tail. And she could indeed draw well: it was on the strength of her almost untutored draughtsmanship that she won a scholarship to Kensington in 1945.

At the school which Jennet went to in Harrogate, girls who were considered bright were not allowed to study art. Clever girls did maths and Latin, dim ones drawing and needlework. They were taught by women who in the main had had to fight for their own education against Victorian prejudice and consequently saw their pupils as wave upon wave of new recruits to a constantly engaged Amazonian front line. But even as a child Jennet, although evidently clever, was not malleable enough to fit her teachers' expectations. She did extremely well without apparent effort. She drew obsessively, filling the margins of her exercise books and every spare scrap of paper with faces, eyes, fish, spirals, the black silhouettes of birds. She could run as fast as a deer pursued, but she would not play team games. She noticed things that other children might not notice: the beauty of an apple seed, the colours particular to bus tickets, the hunched shape made by an old woman scrubbing at her doorstep. But she kept her observations to herself; she was quiet, reserved and watchful and, like a small wild creature only tame by hearsay, she made the fainthearted nervous.

In her final year at school, having by then proved her academic credentials by passing her School Certificate with distinction and being offered a scholarship to Somerville College, Oxford, Jennet was finally given permission to join an art class at a nearby academy. It was in many ways a disappointment. In lesson after lesson students painted autumn leaves in watercolour or drew careful arrangements of wild flowers. But at least there were colours, and pencils, enough to take the edge off Jennet's hunger. As she was not being groomed to pass particular tests, the class teacher, Miss Dundas, left her to her own devices, and for a while Jennet had some time and space to do what she had always wanted.

Many years after she retired, Miss Dundas gave an interview to the *Yorkshire Post* in which she spoke of Jennet's brilliance. A most outstanding scholar, she said, with a precocious gift for form and colour. I was proud to be her mentor. She did not tell about the time when, leafing through Jennet's unattended sketchbook, she came across a series of nude drawings. Bold breasts so unabashed, unconcealed triangles of hair. Drawn from what? Miss Dundas had asked herself. Memory or observation? If not Jennet's body, whose? Miss Dundas had a shameful vision of Jennet studying the naked body of a classmate or, worse perhaps, standing in front of a full-length mirror, one hand curved under her own breast. It was an image she could not shake out of her head.

Richard Mallow had not wished to send his younger child to school. With Barbara, the elder girl, the decision had been simple. She was a querulous little thing, slow to read and write, like her mother in temperament, but unlike her in looks. Where Lorna was fine-boned and pale, Barbara was chunky, and her skin was oddly splodgy, pink leaking into

whiteness, like strawberries in cheesecloth being squeezed for jam. Easily bored and unresourceful, Barbara needed company, and Richard thought she would enjoy a boarding school. But Jennet was so different, so lithe and bright and darting that to shut her in an institution would be like locking up a firefly or a swift.

Richard Mallow had never been a sociable man, and was even less one when he returned from war. He was not a natural pastor. His parishioners put up with him but they did not seek his company. From time to time he dreamed of preaching from the pulpit in a shroud. Once he had believed that Lorna, so innocent, so fair in spite of her own sorrows, would be his lit flame in the dark. He remembered how she had looked up at him at the party where they met, her mouth so soft and pretty. But after years of marriage that mouth was thin with disappointment and besides, if he closed his eyes to kiss it, he saw the mouths of dying men. Mud and blood and waste and pity; an eyeball pinioned on barbed wire. All flesh is grass, he told himself, and wished that it were true. In so many people flesh was all too livid; he wrote about its horrors in his secret poems.

In his nightmares Jennet was his solace. His sweet, dancing, dark-eyed daughter, as fresh as the sap of new grass stems, as pure as clear, cold water. He did not want to let her go. He did not want her freshness tainted, he did not want her to grow up and play lacrosse at school. Persuading himself that she had been left fragile by diphtheria, he insisted that she stay at home, where he taught her himself, in his study, in the afternoons. Strange things she learned for a little girl: geometry, the Greek of the New Testament, French from the works of Racine.

It was Lorna who in the end sent Jennet away. Coming down from her bedroom one morning she heard children's chattering voices and looked to see who else was there. But it

was only Jennet, on her own, sitting where she always sat, on the wide windowsill at the first turning of the staircase, her face pressed tight against a black lead strip between two panes, talking to herself. What will God play with when the sun goes down? she asked. Well you're a foolish girl, and that's a foolish question. She turned her head when her mother called her name, and Lorna saw the child's dark brows beginning to take on her father's frown. Is there any end to the loneliness of children? Lorna' s heart constricted and she applied to Barbara's school in Harrogate without consulting Richard. When a place was offered for Jennet she accepted, and faced Richard with the fact.

Loneliness. Further up the Kirkdale valley from the village, an underground spring wells up to fill a deep, round pool, half hidden in a limestone cleft by a thicket of ash and rowan. Jennet, who from an early age used to go out exploring on her own, discovered it and swam there by herself whenever she could. The water was so icy that it knocked the breath out of her and froze away all feeling, so that she could imagine she had fallen into a different world, where there was nothing but the rush of water and the wind. That private communion with water, the first shock of it, and its baptism of her bare skin, left a print on Jennet's soul, and all her life she would remember it with longing.

It was not loneliness but the constant press of other people, and the timetables, the unrelenting bells, which Jennet found oppressive when she went to school. But in five years of it she made a lasting friendship with a girl called Margaret Metcalf, read a great deal of poetry, wrote some of her own, and acquired an education that supplemented in more conventional ways the one she'd had from Richard. And it was while Jennet was at school that another terrible

war began, which made Lorna mourn her brother anew and thank God she had no sons.

Barbara Mallow, who was seventeen in 1939, went to Doncaster to become a nurse, and from there to St Thomas' in London. Jennet's idea had been to join the WRAF as soon as she was old enough, but Richard was so adamantly set against it that she was forced to change her mind. In Richard the new war had stirred half-buried memories, and as the world slid heedlessly towards conflict he watched it from his fastness with increasing disbelief; how could the same men who had undergone such calvaries only two decades ago now send their sons to suffer? Richard Mallow was a general's son; his father's hand had been among the hands that signed his friends' death warrants. All those Abrahams whetting their blades for Isaacs. Until the eleventh hour Richard Mallow prayed that God would stay the knives. When he saw there would be no reprieve, his always contingent faith was broken. But he was over fifty then, and felt himself to be completely powerless; Litton Kirkdale was his only haven. He knew he could not share his doubts with the people of his parish, seeking hope and cheer and help with knitting woollen socks for soldiers. Instead, as camouflage, he put on a cloak of fierce belligerence, and for the next six years he thundered out impassioned sermons on the righteousness of war to the newly widowed, and families made fatherless. Sermons about just war and just causes, about the Archangel Michael with his flaming sword, the massacre of innocents, the slaughtering of lambs. Young men dying on the cold dark earth, known only unto God. But nothing on that earth would have persuaded Richard Mallow to consign his beloved daughter, his Armistice child, to the burning pyres.

And so, in October 1943, Jennet Mallow took up her place at Oxford to read Greats. If it had not been then, she might have been happy there, but in those bleak war years,

when all that was important was happening beyond this place of pale, hungry girls, bereft of men except the elderly, the unfit and young boys, Jennet was dissatisfied and restless. Later she would describe what she remembered of that time as a series of geometric shapes in drab earth colours. Gothic triangles of brick in burnt sienna, the liver-shaded slab of wall around her college dark against a flat grey sky, circles of thick white china on which were slapped brown squares of minced pork offal and two grey-tinged potatoes. Cold cubicles with brown-stained baths a quarter full of tepid water. Long dark tables and long corridors, linoleum-floored and studded by rows of doors. Whey-faced girls in tweed on bicycles, wavering lines and turning spokes, riding through incessant rain to other corridors and other quiet rooms in which precise and mannered voices talked of poetry as if it were reducible to parts of speech and form.

After a year of it, Jennet had had enough. She needed to do something useful. Reading Greek and Latin felt like self-indulgence then. And she was very homesick for infinities of sky, for wind fresh off the moors. Oxford in the winter was a dungeon to her, a dank place where no light came in and real life was forgotten. Then a letter came from Margaret Metcalf which suggested an escape. Margaret was working as a land girl in South Cornwall, and she wrote about the need for fresh recruits. Jennet volunteered, gave up her place at Somerville, and was quickly assigned to a farm about five miles from Truro.

No wind from the moors there, but the salt breath of the estuary and the sweet-rot scent of cows. Kind Mr Lawe's prize herd of Friesians, black and white in satisfying patterns, the heft and weight of them swaying from their hips, balanced on their dainty legs, their skittish, frisking tails. It was Jennet's job to milk them and to clean their sheds: hard work, and the animals were a bit intimidating at the start,

with their mutinously lowered heads and refractory heels. An unremitting schedule too: wet winter mornings and her fingers chilblained on zinc buckets, the slurry and the slide of mud across the farmyard, the well-trampled fields. Milking in the dark by gaslight, carting heavy churns and loads of hay. But there were real pleasures, once she'd learned them: the female closeness of the milking, the white expression yielding to her fingers, the solidness of a cow's flank, their warm, rich smell and their generosity; the sheer presence of those patient cattle giving freely of their bulk, their heat, their comfort on the coldest mornings, and in the evenings, when she penned them in, a share in their unquestioned safety.

There was the magic of the landscape too, new to her who had never travelled, never been much further west than Sherborne, where she had spent dull holidays with her great-aunt and grandmother. On this south-western coast the fields were green and gentle and violets blossomed in December, but the cliffs were steep. For the first time Jennet saw how the horizon curves, the line of light that marks off sky and sea. She had seen other shorelines before, but it was from this rocky one that she first witnessed the vastness of surrounding seas, as if she were a gull.

Jennet had her Sundays free, and walked for miles, alone, or with Margaret, scrambling up cliff paths and headlands, absorbing the colours of the water and the earth. She tried to hold them in her mind with words at first, for they made her think of poetry, but there were no words exact enough for her, or still unused. Waves unfurling like bales of shot grey silk unspooled, the sky ribbed with clouds like mackerel bones? No, everybody who stares out to sea and then tries to describe it dips first into the same old pool of words, which was too stale for Jennet. Since early childhood she had felt in secret a discoverer's conviction: that she would find

something new. So in place of words she turned to paint. In Cornwall, that sense she had always had of a mysterious, preverbal power returned. Her resources were very limited; paper was rationed, she had only a student's box of watercolours, a few tubes of oils and rudimentary skills. Knowing this, she did not aim for finish, but for apprentice work. On her own she began to learn the basis of her craft.

Ultramarine blue deep, Byzantine blue, cobalt cerulean. Jennet Mallow might not have had the colours or the skills then, but she knew she could acquire them. Christening the sea and sky with their precise richnesses of colour – turquoise, azure, sapphire – was like learning a new language, one she found she loved. Until that time of physical exhaustion and solitary thought in Cornwall, Jennet had not known what she really wanted. She had not dared to think of art as a way of living. But now, here, suddenly, it struck her as the only way; the only way that she could say out loud what she knew was worth the saying.

In the year that Jennet spent at New Kea Farm she put together a selection of drawings and in July 1945 she sent it to the Kensington School of Art. It was the only art school she had heard of. In August she was invited to attend an entrance examination. A bearded man enquired why she drew so many cows. She was given a great sheet of blank white paper – frighteningly blank, more space than she had ever had before – and told to make a study of an elderly lady posing as Aphrodite. Next to Jennet a silent man with a crooked back drew nothing but the model's knee in the dead centre of his sheet. A letter came the following week to tell her she had won a scholarship. Saying goodbye to Mr Lawe and to the cows, she went back home for a few weeks to Litton Kirkdale.