
Opening Extract from...

The Book of Fires

Written by Jane Borodale

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JANE BORODALE

The Book of Fires

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77–85 Fulham Palace Road
Hammersmith
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With thoughts spared for all those
condemned to death by hanging at Tyburn.

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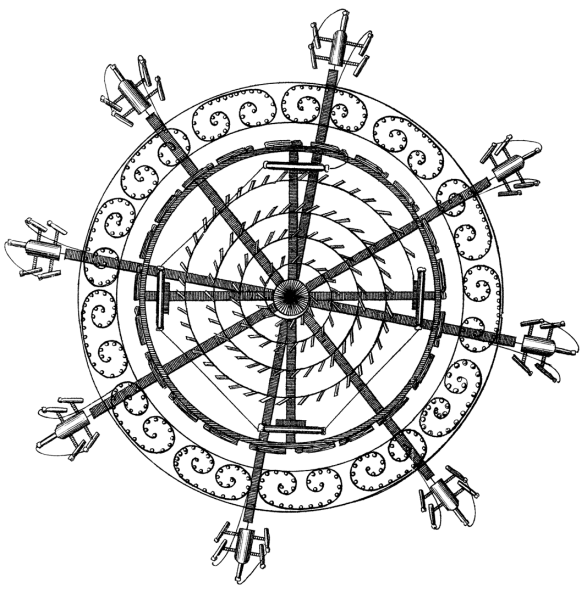
Fixed Suns



One

THERE IS A REGULAR RASP of a blade on a stone as he sharpens the knives. The blade makes a shuddery, tight noise that I feel in my teeth. It's November, and today is the day that we kill the pig.

I am inside the house, bending over the hearth. I lay pieces of dry elm and bark over the embers and they begin to kindle as the fire takes. A warm fungus smell rises up and the logs bubble juices and resin. The fed flames spit and crackle, coloured jets hissing out wet. A column of thick smoke pours rapidly up the chimney and out into the sky like a grey liquid into milk. I hang the bellows from the strap and straighten up. Fire makes me feel good. Burning things into ash and nothingness makes my purpose seem clearer.

When I stand back, I see that the kitchen is full of smoke. My mother is busy and short of breath, flustering between the trestles and the fireside, two blotches of colour rising on her cheekbones. This fire must be a roasting blaze, one of the hottest of the year. It has to heat the biggest pots brimful with boiling water to scald the pigskin, and later will simmer the barley and puddings, fatty blood and grain packed into the washed guts, moving cleanly around in the cauldron of water. I go to the door and step out into the yard to fetch more wood. The weather is not gasping cold yet, but the chill is here. It is already not far till Martinmas though the frosts have not

set in like most years, and my breath is a white cloud ahead of me. A low sun has risen over the valley, pushing thin shadows into the lane. The damp air smells of rotting leaves and dung and the smoke from the chimney. I can hear rooks making coarse-throated noises over the beech trees on the hill. And my brother is whetting the blades by the back door, scraping the metal over the stone away from him. As I cross the yard to the wood stack, I see the knife catching the shine of the orange sun as he works, a sharp flash of blinding light.

I whisper a list of things into the wood stack as I pull out logs and branches and pile them up against the front of my dress.

My name is Agnes.

I live in a cottage on the edge of the village of Washington, at the foot of the Downs where the greensand turns into clay. The lane that leads past the cottage is narrow and muddy, and floods with a milky whiteness when the rain pours down from the hill. Above us the scarp is thickly wooded, up to the open chalk tops where the sheep graze. My father's family have been in Sussex for years. I am seventeen, we are quite often hungry, I work half of the day weaving cloth for the trade. And for the remainder, I do what girls do; stir the pots, feed the hens, slap the wind from the babies, make soap, make threepence go further …

His knife has paused. There is an unsteadiness on the air, something which does not add up to what I say. I stop myself talking and balance the armful of logs up on my shoulder to carry them in.

The earth floor of the kitchen is a clutter of borrowed pots. We collected them from Mrs Mellin days ago and are scalding them clean. My mother is counting out onions and shallots ready for chopping. She reaches up to the salt box over the mantel.

'Mother! Hester's grizzling,' I say to her loudly over the confusion of children, as though she were deaf, and she leaves the hearth and ducks into the back room, bending her long uncomfortable body over the truckle bed to pick up Hester. Her back is like a twist inside her

clothes as she jigs the baby up and down on her hip to make her quiet. Her patience wears a little thinner with each child that comes.

We have debts in the village. My father's work pays less since enclosure started, and he has been looking for any hiring that he can get. There is no more hedging work in the district. Last week he came home with six blue rock doves that we hid in a pile in the brewhouse until he could take them to Pulborough for the fair. My mother had been angry all day and when he came back after dark they fought for hours, using up rushlight. When we came down from the chamber in the morning I saw one of the jugs was cracked but put away tidily at the back of the shelf. This is the third full year we have not had a strip to grow a crop, and even the common land could be gone by the next, so this is the last pig.

Through the door into the back room my father's feet are just visible at the end of the other bed under the blanket. He will be up soon, before my uncle arrives.

'We are doing the pig early this year, but we owe and this will sort us out,' was all that he said when he'd made up his mind which day was for slaughtering. His face was flat and there was a bad quietness at the table. I stirred my soup round and round with my spoon. 'There will be enough left over,' my mother said as she stood up and returned to the weaving, but it sounded more like a question, as if she were asking for something. Her hands rubbed up and down her overskirt before she picked up the shuttle. I fear that any day now we could come downstairs to find large men in dark clothes blocking the light from the open door; one writing notes with a long plumy pen and the other pointing directions while the rooms are emptied and our belongings piled outside in the lane.

But I am not myself. The sickness and bad-temper that has been causing me trouble for the last few weeks is rising as usual and will last for hours. I squat by the hearth, laying the logs over the spitting hot brash without burning my fingers. Hester is fretting. Her mouth

is sore as her teeth push themselves up in her gums, and she is still missing her sister. Ann began to work at Wiston House two months ago and she has not been forgiven for leaving us here, but only Hester is allowed to voice her feelings. My own fury is absorbed into the house by other means.

I know that Mother can't manage with the children the way that she is. Her body is giving out. Last year two children came too early like small undressed poppets and we buried them at the back of the house wrapped in cloth, but more keep coming, and now her old woman's body is big with another weight.

The fire is taking.

Long yellow flames build up the heat, for a hard day's work. I send William to fetch more water from the pump at the end of the lane, and I occupy myself with rubbing at the pots.

I am covering it well. I won't even let her see that I feel sick, or she will think I have an ague and make me swallow a mush of herbs or a live spider rolled in butter. I can tell no one what is happening to me, not even Ann, and now she is gone there is nobody to notice. I have only missed two bleedings and yet the small storm inside is changing me within these months. My girl's nipples ache with a new weight and my hair feels different, as though it grew from another girl's head. Sometimes, keeping this disaster to myself makes me feel as if I should explode, and I begin to beg myself to tell someone. And then, after those moments of weakness, I make myself imagine the day that my mother notices, the burst of her anger stiffening to shame as she turns her back. My father would take on a rage lasting long after he had staggered two miles from the ale-house. I never imagine what would occur after that. Even the thought of it causes a rickety panic to rise up inside me, making my heart rush around in a tight chest. My head is light with complication. I spend hours awake in the dark lying rigid in bed while I try to change things with the violence of thought that comes in the night. *It's a mistake. It wasn't my fault.* It was all my fault, and

my mistake is made flesh, and will swell up inside me. Perhaps I will die in childbirth and they will have to forgive me, standing around the coffin they could never afford as I'm lowered into the earth in St Mary's churchyard.

How dark it is when I try to sleep. It is as if I were breathing in the night itself; not just the air but the sense and smell of darkness. Every night I listen to my sisters' breath rising and falling effortlessly there beside me, until I am too tired not to sleep. On pig-killing day we have to rise before the sun, as the morning comes so late this time of year.

We will boil up Mrs Mellin's pots one by one and my father and my uncle will kneel their weight on the pig so they can stick the knife in at the heel of the throat. It is hard not to run away. I remember how I ran away one year; out into the lane to get away from the sound. The pig roared and roared, an ear-splitting agony of held-down terror, the back legs scrabbling and squealing out the last drops of panic, even as the knife went in. Then the squeal bubbled and stopped. The quietness was a shock. Out in the lane I held my elbows tightly in the emptiness that followed and then on the far side of the copse a woodpecker drilled holes into the silence. My feet slapped loudly on the muddy path as I ran back hastily before they saw that I was gone. This year the pig is smaller; a spayed sow with a black patch at the back of her head. Her eyes are very small, as though she were willing to let enough light in but will give nothing away through her stiff, pale lashes.

I shall hold the pot up to catch the bright burst of blood rushing crimson from the slit. Steam will rise from the warmth of it as it pours into the cold earthenware. It will be a slow thickness, cooling and darkening as I stir and stir, lifting out the threads and clots, tipping the cooked barley in to make up the puddings. Later we will pour scalding water over the pig's coat and take turns to pull the candlestick hard over it the wrong way to take the bristles off without breaking the skin. There is always a strange smell, and rooks and other scavenger birds hang around the orchard. William scares them off, running on his

short legs waving the broom that is almost as big as him over his head, and they fly heavily above, circling the chimney with their black wings fanned out like leather gloves. Lil says they are the kind of birds that give you bad dreams.

She knows nothing of the sense in my belly, none of them do.

It is a small fat heat that began to grow two months ago, after the last of the beans were down. That last quick crop had been a good one, all the others previous were blighted with mould, June and July having been so damp and wet. Our hair smelt good in the late sunshine as we split the fresh pods open with our nails until our hands were green, spreading the tender beans out on the mats to dry. Our hands smelt of broken leaves. It was warm for September, almost like a St John's summer. We rested at the edge of the field upon the bank. I remember that Ann stood up and moved her shadow so that it fell across my face as she took the empty buckets back to the outhouse. The last drops of the midday ale were gone and my mother was way back at the house where the weaving was behind for the week, bulky hanks of unwoven yarn piling up by the loom. There was so much work to do; I cannot truly say why I was so lazy on that afternoon. There were no clouds in the dusty sky, just a milky blue space stretching up and up. A long way above the beech trees, black specks of swifts and martins were moving about, almost invisible. It was still. I can remember the flighty look of the seeds at the top of the grasses, and the tiny purple vetch twisting in the hedge beside me. The sun beat down. I heard the squeak of wattle as Ann closed the gate, and fell asleep.

I don't like to remember most of what came next. His face was up close above me and blocked out the sky, his neck smelt like a warm stone. I remember the feel of him as he rubbed his hands about like he sometimes did if he could catch me. His fingers inside me felt like

a goat kicking out. At first it almost felt good. I opened myself wider and shut my eyelids red against the sun. The weight of the sun on me was like a blessing. Then he pushed my knees apart wider under my skirts and put his length on me. I had to bite into his hand as it pressed my mouth. His hand was salty and full of muscle. I was blinded by the sun, my head pressed into the soft bank. It was intolerable. The discomfort made me choke out loud. Then it was finished and he rolled off me and sat there with his eyes narrowed in the sun like a man leaning against Chantry Post up on the hill, taking in the view.

And then he'd just said, 'See you Tuesday, then,' whistled for his grubby dog to come and leave the rabbit holes alone, and sauntered up the lane. It was as if I was not there at all. My legs shook under me as I stood up, and I spat into the hedge to get the feel of him away from me.

Did I cause that to happen? Surely it was something that I did. I'd thought he liked me.

I waited for an hour or more, until the signs of tears were gone from my face, and then left the field for home, closing the gate behind me as I went.

I was sure that they would see my guiltiness and shame, somehow smell my difference or see some sign of it. I was too afraid to go inside. I kicked my heels against the granite of the trough by the back door until the last of the sky was slipping down all brightly concentrated behind the thorns in the field below the house. Bats flew overhead. Inside the cottage Lil and Ab were bickering between the hall and parlour. I saw Ann walk into the back room and put a flame to the rushlights, her face lit from beneath with a wobbling glow as she came close to the window. A chill grew out there and settled in me as the darkness seeped into the valley, and I waited, shivery, for my father to come home. Then I could see his bulk approaching through the half-light in the lane. He was made taller by the sticks strapped to his back and the sticks were the clearest part of his shape against the white walls

as he rounded the corner towards me. I held my breath that he was sober.

'Ag, your mother back?' was all that he said when he saw me there, knocking the clay from his great boots against the step and lowering his bundle to the ground. Then he ducked under the lintel before I could answer and I followed him in.

My mother put down the baby and stood up to serve the supper as he entered. She was tired of mending and her mouth made a hard line when she saw that my skirt was torn at the side.

It was September, the busiest time of the year.

'Agnes!' she is shouting. I forget myself, am nearly spilling the blood out on to the stones in the yard. I level the pot. There is so much pig's blood, perhaps eight full pints of it. There are red splashes all over the ground, and my feet ache with the cold.

'What is the matter with you, dreamy girl?' my mother scolds. Her breath is white all round her in the cold air, so that I can hardly see her mouth.

My uncle slits and empties the pig in a rush of dark bowels. It is washed. We are all there watching when he pulls out the heart. It is marbled with a fan of yellow fat, like veins over a leaf.

Then he hangs the pig from her back legs, big in the outhouse, and two days pass for the flesh to become firm.

Its presence is everywhere; a twelve-score weight pulling at the hooks between the tendon and the ankle. The head hangs straight under the spine although the throat is cut, and pink fluid runs down the snout and drips into a pot upon the ground.

When I go to the outhouse to fetch soap for the laundry, William is there scolding the cats away from the bucket of soft parts that we have not yet eaten. He picks up a twig and pokes in amongst the wetness.

'What is that?' he asks. I look, and tell him that it is the stomach.

'The slippery stomach, the slippery stomach, shall we tickle it, shall we?' he says, and shrieks in horror at his own joke and runs away.

I take my turn at the loom.

It is a quietly complicated object, causing nothing but a runnel of thoughts to slide evenly through my mind as my hands follow their task at the shuttle and threads, in the same way as a horse will step along a familiar route without heed or guidance. When my hands are engaged in this way, the thoughts of trouble that rankle inside do not take me over. It is when the racket of the loom ceases abruptly that the twisting panic returns and plunges a kind of darkness through my head, as though a sharp wind had gone through a house snuffing out candles and leaving space for fear. I arrive at that point early in the day when I have sat out one hour at the loom.

'Agnes!' my mother shouts suddenly into the back chamber, making me jump. 'We are short of a skillet!'

So I leave the house to get the pot, my ears buzzing with the silence of my stopped work, and head out on the lane as I am bidden. My mother's voice, muttering instructions out to Lil as they prepare the stew, dwindles and then vanishes as I walk. The sun is out, and sparrows flit and whirr between the hedges.

Mrs Mellin is our closest neighbour and her house lies in the opposite direction to the village, along the muddy white road that leads to the chalk-pit. She lives declining and alone; her son was taken away by the press-gang in a port on the coast three years ago, and was said to have died of drink or bullying. Her husband has been dead for as long as any of us can remember. He died on a Sunday; Mother said he was a thoughtless man who had left his wife little but bad habits.

It is a pleasant day, and for all our troubles perhaps the winter may not be so bad. There is a blue sky above the top of the ridge of the Downs, and sunshine is shivering patches of brightness through the trees by the side of the road as I walk. But the sun is getting old now

for the year. Sitting lower in the sky each day, it hardly warms the ground at all, and my feet walk along the lane in shadow.

Her cottage sits tightly into the base of the scarp, the steep coppice threatening to swallow it. I call loudly as I approach, and hear how her chickens make a fuss and clamour at the side of the house. The door at the front is shut and I lift the latch and push it open, bending straight into the coldness of the parlour. A brown cat rushes outside.

'Hello!' I call. 'Good day, Mrs Mellin!'

Mrs Mellin is deaf, and she doesn't answer my greeting as I clatter about, choosing a skillet. The pots are loud and hollow on the worn brick floor as I stack them into their habitual places behind the dirty cloth stretched under the shelf. I go into the kitchen, where she is always. She has her back to me, sitting in front of a stone-cold grate. 'Oh!' I say in concern. 'Why is your fire out, Mrs Mellin?'

And I am shocked. Mrs Mellin is dead in her chair. Her purple tongue is sticking out and her eyes are rolled back in her head. Her arm lolls down over the edge of the chair. On the floor, as if it has rolled away from her, is a small china jar, the jar that usually sits on the left of her mantelpiece. The lid is further away, almost out of sight, right under her chair. My mouth is dry.

'Oh, Mrs Mellin.' I am afraid and sorry. My heart beats very fast. I talk to her as if she were asleep as I prop her head and push her eyelids closed. I expect her body to be stiff but she is soft and limp. I don't look at her tongue and I hear myself talking giddily to her in a way that I don't recognise. She doesn't need me to be foolish, but I talk and talk. I pick up her fingers between my own and fold them into a sensible arrangement in her lap. She looks more ordinary now, although I still don't look at her tongue. Her hands are neither cold nor warm, they are the same temperature as the wooden chair that she is sitting on. Mine are still warm after walking fast up the lane in the sunshine; I see I still have black blood under my fingernails. I sit down on the settle at the other side of the hearth to gather my breath and ask myself

to whom I should run and ask for help. It is a long way to the Rectory. I stand up again. My mother will be working without me, thin and tired after the long day boiling pudding and preparing to salt the new pork flesh in the big trough. When it is done we will wash off the salt and hang the sides from the iron hooks at the back of the hearth in the smoke. I should go home again. I am ashamed to think of eating but a sudden thought of the taste of meat makes my mouth flood with water.

I do not know how much time has passed. I lean forward. Perhaps I have made a mistake, and Mrs Mellin is just asleep or ill. Perhaps she needs help. She is not much liked. I lift her eyelid back up, gingerly. Her eye is yellowish blank and I notice that there is an odd smell about her, as though she were already changing into another substance. No, I have been around dead things enough now to know that Mrs Mellin has been gone for some days. I stand back; I must send a child to tell the Rector she is deceased. He will come and he will say some words and let her fingers touch the cover of his Bible and then they will bury her and that will be that. I bend down to pick up the fallen jar beside her chair and glance inside.

And there are the bright coins.

They spill out and roll and clatter on the floor in my surprise. They gleam and flash astonishingly as I bend again to pick each one up and turn it over in my fingers. I count a guinea; a half-guinea; one, two, three, four, five crowns and a handful of foreign gold, perhaps from Spain. The burnish on them is high, as if she had spent time polishing each one. They are so bright: brighter than rosehips in a dark hedge, than birch leaves in October, than celandines, toadflax, than stones still wet from the river bed, than yellow fungus in the coppice, than the yolk of a hen's egg. They are like … Fire. Like the sun.

And then the coins change as I am holding them and begin to show their value to me. My heart begins to beat so fast that I can hardly hear the plan taking shape inside my head.