

THE  
LAND  
OF  
LOST  
THINGS

John Connolly

  
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1

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Lyrics from the song 'From the Morning': 'Now we rise, and we are everywhere',  
from the album *Pink Moon* by Nick Drake, 1972, used by permission.

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Books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are.

John Milton, *Areopagitica*

And now we rise, and we are everywhere.

Nick Drake, 'From The Morning'



# I

## Uhtceare

(OLD ENGLISH)

*To Lie Awake Before Dawn,  
Too Worried to Sleep*



wise upon a time – for that is how some stories should continue – there was a mother whose daughter was stolen from her. Oh, she could still see the girl. She could touch her skin and brush her hair. She could watch the slow rise and fall of her chest, and if she placed her hand upon the child's breast, she could feel the beating of her heart. But the child was silent, and her eyes remained closed. Tubes helped her to breathe, and tubes kept her fed, but for the mother it was as though the essence of the one she loved was elsewhere, and the figure in the bed was a shell, a mannequin, waiting for a disembodied soul to return and animate it.

In the beginning, the mother believed that her daughter was still present, sleeping, and that by the sound of a beloved voice telling stories and sharing news she might be induced to wake. But as the days became weeks, and the weeks became months, it grew harder and harder for the mother to keep faith in the immanence of her daughter, and so she grew to fear that everything that was her child, all that gave her meaning – her conversation, her laughter, even her crying – might never come back, and she would be left entirely bereft.

The mother's name was Ceres, and her daughter was called Phoebe. There was also a man once – but not a father, because Ceres refused to dignify him with the word, he having left them to fend for themselves before the girl was even born. As far as Ceres was aware, he was living somewhere in Australia, and had never shown any desire to be part of his daughter's life. To be honest, Ceres was happy with this situation. She had not felt any lasting love for the man, and his disengagement suited her. She retained some small gratitude towards him for helping to create Phoebe, and on occasion she saw a little of him in her daughter's eyes and smile, but it was a fleeting thing, like a half-remembered figure glimpsed on the platform of a station as the train rolls by; sighted then soon forgotten. Phoebe, too, had demonstrated only minimal curiosity about him, but with no accompanying wish to make contact, even though Ceres had always assured her that she could, if she wanted to. He was not on any social media, regarding it as the devil's work, but a few of his acquaintances used Facebook, and Ceres knew that they would get a message to him, if required.

But that necessity had never arisen, not until the accident. Ceres wanted him to know what had happened, if only because the trauma was too much for her to bear alone, even as all attempts to share it failed to diminish it. Ultimately she received only a curt acknowledgement via one of his associates: a single line, informing her that he was sorry to hear about the 'mishap', and he hoped Phoebe would get better soon, as though the child that was a part of him were struggling with flu or measles, and not the aftermath of a catastrophic collision between a car and the delicate body of an eight-year-old girl.

For the first time, Ceres hated Phoebe's father, hated him almost as much as the idiot who'd been texting while driving – and sending a message, not to his wife, but to his girlfriend, which made him both an idiot and a deceiver. He'd visited the hospital a few days after the accident, forcing Ceres to request he be removed before he could talk to her. Since then he'd tried to

contact her both directly and through his lawyers, but she wanted nothing to do with him. She hadn't even wanted to sue him, not at first, although she'd been advised that she had to, if only to pay for her daughter's care, because who knew how long Phoebe might endure this half-life: turned regularly by the nurses so that her poor skin would not develop bedsores, and surviving only with the aid of technology. Phoebe had banged her head on the ground after the impact, and so, while the rest of her injuries were healing, something in her brain remained damaged, and no one could say when, or if, it might repair itself.

A whole new vocabulary had presented itself to Ceres, an alien way of interpreting a person's continuance in the world: cerebral oedema, axonal injury, and most important of all, to mother and child, the Glasgow Coma Scale, the metric by which Phoebe's consciousness – and, by extension, possibly her right to life – was now determined. Score less than five across eye, verbal, and motor responses, and the chances of death or existing in a persistent vegetative state were 80 per cent. Score more than eleven, and the chances of recovery were estimated at 90 per cent. Hover, like Phoebe, between those two figures and, well . . .

Phoebe wasn't brain-stem dead; that was the important thing. Her brain still flickered faintly with activity. The doctors believed that Phoebe wasn't suffering, but who could say for sure? (This, always spoken softly, and at the end, almost as an afterthought: *Who can say for sure? We just don't know, you see. The brain, it's such a complex organism. We don't think there's any pain, but . . .*) A conversation had taken place at the hospital, during which it was suggested that, down the line, if Phoebe showed no signs of improvement, it might be a kindness to – this with a change of tone, and a small, sad smile – let her go.

Ceres would look for hope in their faces, but find only sympathy. She did not want sympathy. She just wanted her daughter returned to her.

29 October: that was the first visit Ceres had missed, the first day she hadn't been with Phoebe since the accident. Ceres's body simply wouldn't lift itself from the chair in which she had sat to rest. It was too exhausted, too worn down, and so she'd closed her eyes and gone to sleep again. Later, when she woke in that same chair to the dawn light, she felt such guilt that she wept. She checked her phone, certain that she'd missed a message from the hospital informing her that, in her absence – no, because of her absence – Phoebe had passed away, her radiance finally forever dimmed. But there was no message, and when Ceres called the hospital she was told that all was as it had been, and probably as it would continue to be: stillness, and silence.

That was the beginning. Soon she was visiting the hospital only five days out of seven, sometimes even four, and so it had remained ever since. Her sense of culpability became less immediate, although it continued to hover in the background: a grey shape, like a spectre. It haunted the shadows of the living-room on those mornings and afternoons when she stayed at home, and sometimes she saw it reflected in the television screen as she turned off the set at night, a smear against the dark. The spectre had many faces, occasionally even her own. After all, she was a mother who had brought a child into the world and then failed to protect her, letting Phoebe skip just a few steps ahead as they crossed Balham High Road. They were only feet from the kerb, and the crossing was quiet, when Phoebe slipped her grip. It was an instant of inattention, but seconds later there was a blur, and a dull thud, and then her daughter as Ceres knew her was gone. Left in her place was a changeling.

Yet the presence that inhabited the dark was not a manifestation of guilt alone, but of something older and more implacable. It was Death Itself, or more correctly Herself, because it assumed a female aspect. On the worst nights at the hospital, as Ceres drifted into uneasy sleep beside her daughter, she could feel Death hovering, seeking her chance. Death would



*The Land of Lost Things*

have taken Phoebe on the High Road, if only the child had landed a little more sharply on the ground, and now she remained tantalisingly out of reach. Ceres sensed Death's impatience, and heard her voice, so close to kindness: *'When this becomes too much to bear, ask, and I will disencumber you both.'*

And it was all Ceres could do not to give in.

## II

# Putherry

(STAFFORDSHIRE)

### *The Deep, Humid Stillness Before a Storm Breaks*



eres arrived at the hospital a little later than usual, and damp from the rain. Under her arm she carried a book of fairy stories, one Phoebe had loved since she was very young, but had never read herself. It was a book she associated only with being read aloud to, and usually at night, so that all her affection for it, and all of its power, was tied up with the sound of her mother's voice. Even as she grew older, Phoebe still took pleasure in being read to by Ceres, but from this book alone, and only when she was sad or anxious. The collection was battered at the edges, and stained by fingerprints and spilled tea, but it was their book, a symbol of the bond between them.

Ceres's father had once told her that books retained traces of all those who read them, in the form of flakes of skin, hairs visible and minute, the oils from their fingertips, even blood and tears, so that just as a book became part of the reader, so, too, did a reader become part of the book. Each volume was a record of those who had opened its pages, an archive of the living and the dead. If Phoebe died, Ceres had decided that the book of fairy tales should be laid to rest with her. She could

take it into the next world, and keep it close until her mother joined her, because if Phoebe perished, Ceres knew that it would not be long before she followed behind. She did not want to remain in a world in which her daughter was reduced to a memory. She thought this might also be the reason why she took no comfort from looking at videos of Phoebe on her phone, or listening to recordings of her voice. These were relics, totems from the past, like a haunting, and Ceres did not wish for a Phoebe that was gone, but for a Phoebe yet to be.

A notice board beside the main entrance to the hospital reminded parents that a support group for those dealing with a sick child met every Wednesday night, with refreshments available after. Ceres had attended only once, sitting unspeaking while others shared their pain. Some of the parents were much worse off than Ceres. She still had hope for Phoebe, but surrounding her that evening had been mothers and fathers whose children would never get better, with no prospect of surviving into adulthood. The experience had left Ceres feeling even more depressed and angry than usual. As a result, she'd never gone back, and when she passed any of the parents from the group, she did her best not to catch their eyes.

She recognised, too, that Phoebe's accident had resulted in a change in her own identity. She was no longer herself, but was now 'Phoebe's mother'. It was how the hospital staff frequently referred to her – 'Phoebe's mother is here', 'Phoebe's mother would like an update' – as did the parents of the kids with whom Phoebe used to go to school. Ceres was not a person in her own right, but was to be defined solely in terms of her relationship to her suffering child. It seemed to accentuate Ceres's sense of dislocation and unreality, as though she could almost see herself fading away, just like her daughter.

A nurse greeted her as she entered Phoebe's room: Stephanie, who had been there on that first night, Phoebe and Ceres both covered in the same blood. Ceres knew nothing at all about Stephanie beyond her name, because she had never asked. Since

the accident, Ceres's interest in the lives of those around her had largely fallen away.

Stephanie pointed at the book. 'The usual, I see,' she said. 'They never tire of them, do they?'

Ceres felt a pricking at her eyes at this small kindness: the assumption that Phoebe, wherever she was, might be aware of these stories, of her mother's continued attendance, and they might yet be capable of revitalising her.

'No, they never do,' said Ceres. 'But—' She stopped herself. 'Not to worry, it's not important.'

'It might be,' said Stephanie. 'If you change your mind, just let me know.'

But she didn't go about her duties, and Ceres knew that the nurse had further business with her.

'Before you leave, Mr Stewart would like a quick word,' said Stephanie. 'If you drop by the nurses' station when you have a moment, I'll take you to see him.'

Mr Stewart was the principal physician responsible for Phoebe's care. He was patient, and solicitous, but Ceres remained suspicious of him because of his relative youth. She did not believe he had lived long enough – or, more correctly, suffered enough – to be able to deal properly with the suffering of others. And there was something in the nurse's face, something in her eyes, that told Ceres this conversation was not going to bring her any easement. She felt an end approaching.

'I'll do that,' said Ceres, while in her mind she pictured herself running from the hospital, her daughter gathered to her breast, the bedsheet like a shroud, only for it to be carried away by the wind, floating high into the air like a departing ghost, leaving her to discover that her arms were empty.

'If I'm not there, just ask them to page me,' said Stephanie.

And there it was again, this time in the nurse's smile: a sadness, a regret.

*This is a nightmare, Ceres thought, a living one, and only death will bring it to a close.*

### III

## Wann

(OLD ENGLISH)

### *The Darkness of a Rook's Feathers*



eres read to Phoebe for an hour, but had anyone asked her the substance of the stories, she would have been unable to tell them, so distracted was she. Finally she set the book aside and brushed her daughter's hair, working so gently at the tangles that Phoebe's head remained undisturbed on the pillow. Phoebe's eyes were closed; they were always closed now. Ceres saw only a suggestion of the blue of them when Mr Stewart or one of his juniors came by to lift the lids and check on Phoebe's pupillary responses, like pale clouds briefly parting to reveal a glimpse of sky. She set aside the hairbrush and rubbed moisturiser into Phoebe's hands – peach-scented, because Phoebe liked the smell of peaches – before straightening her nightgown and rubbing tiny flecks of sleep from the corners of the shuttered lenses. When these small services were complete, Ceres took Phoebe's right hand and kissed the tips of each finger.

'Return to me,' she whispered, 'because I miss you so.'

She heard a noise at the window of the room, and looked up to see a bird staring at her through the glass. It was missing its left eye, the injury marked by twin scars. It tilted its head, croaked once, and then was gone.

‘Was that a crow?’

She turned. Stephanie was standing in the doorway. Ceres wondered how long she had been there, waiting.

‘No,’ said Ceres, ‘a rook. They used to haunt battlefields.’

‘Why?’ asked Stephanie.

‘To feed on the dead.’

The words were out of Ceres’s mouth before she could block them.

*Scavenger. Carrion seeker.*

*Omen.*

The nurse stared at her, uncertain of how to respond.

‘Well,’ she said at last, ‘it’ll find no pickings here.’

‘No,’ agreed Ceres, ‘not here, not today.’

‘How do you know such things?’ said Stephanie. ‘About rooks and the like, I mean?’

‘My father taught them to me, when I was younger.’

‘That’s an odd lesson to be teaching a child.’

Ceres placed Phoebe’s hand on the bedspread, and stood.

‘Not for him. He was a university librarian, and an amateur folklorist. He could talk about giants, witches, and wyrms until your eyes glazed over.’

Stephanie gestured once again at the book under Ceres’s arm.

‘Is that where you and Phoebe got your love of fairy stories? My own boy devours them. I think we may even have a copy of that same book, or one very like it.’

Ceres almost laughed.

‘This? My father would have hated to see me reading Phoebe such nonsense.’

‘And why would that be?’

Ceres thought of the old man, dead now these five years. Phoebe had been permitted to know him only briefly, and he her.

‘Because,’ she said, ‘they just aren’t dark enough.’

The consultant didn't have an office of his own in the main hospital, but worked from a private room in an adjoining building. Stephanie escorted Ceres to his door, even though she knew the way. It made her feel like a prisoner being led to the gallows. The room was anonymous, apart from a bright piece of abstract art on the wall behind the desk. There were no pictures of Mr Stewart's family, though she knew he was married with children. Ceres always found it odd that doctors, once they attained a certain level of expertise, became plain old misters once again. If she had spent years training to be a doctor, the last thing she would have wanted was to forego the title she'd worked so hard to obtain. She'd probably have had it branded on her forehead.

She took a seat across from Mr Stewart, and they made small talk: the weather, an apology for the smell of fresh paint, the decorators having just been in, but neither of them had their heart in it, and gradually it dwindled to nothing.

'Just say whatever you have to say,' Ceres told him. 'It's the waiting that kills us.'

She spoke as mildly as she could, but it still emerged sounding harsher than she might have wished.

'We think that Phoebe requires a different level of care from now on,' said Mr Stewart. 'Supportive, rather than curative. Her condition hasn't altered, which is good in one way, although it may not seem so at first glance. It hasn't worsened, in other words, and we believe she's as comfortable as she's likely to be, for a while.'

'But that's all you can do for her?' said Ceres. 'Make her comfortable, I mean, not make her better?'

'Yes, that's all we can do for now. Which is not to say that, down the line, this won't change, either through developments in treatment or Phoebe's own capacity for recovery.'

He looked strained, and Ceres thought she understood why he didn't keep pictures of his wife and kids on his desk. Who could tell how many such conversations he was forced to endure every day, with parents hearing the worst news about their

children? For some, being required to look at a picture of another man's healthy family while they tried to come to terms with their own grief would only add to their burden. Not Ceres, though: she hoped only that, each day when he went home, Mr Stewart hugged his children to him and gave thanks for what he had been given. She was glad that he had his family, and she wished them only happiness. The world had enough misery to be getting along with.

'And what are the chances of that?' she said.

'There is limited brain activity,' said Mr Stewart, 'but there *is* activity. We have to hope.'

Ceres began to cry. She hated herself for doing it, even though it wasn't the first time she'd cried in front of this man. Yes, she continued to hope, but it was hard, and she was so weary. Mr Stewart said nothing, but gave her time to recover herself.

'How is work?' he asked.

'Non-existent.'

Ceres did freelance copywriting, which had expanded into copyediting, but that was all past tense. She hadn't been able to concentrate since the accident, and so hadn't been able to work, which meant she wasn't bringing in any money. She had already spent most of her savings – not that she'd ever had much, not as a single mother living in London – and really didn't know how she could continue. It was one of the reasons why she'd agreed to sue the driver, but he and his lawyers were resisting the payment of even a modest interim sum for fear that it might leave them open to greater liability down the line. The whole mess would have kept her awake at night, if she wasn't so exhausted all the time.

'I don't wish to pry—' said Mr Stewart.

'Pry away. I don't have a great deal left to hide.'

'How badly are you struggling?'

'Pretty badly, in every way, including financially.'

'I may be mistaken,' said Mr Stewart, 'but didn't you tell me that your family owned a property in Buckinghamshire?'



‘Yes,’ said Ceres, ‘a small cottage not too far from Olney. It was my childhood home. My mother still uses it during the summer, and Phoebe and I spend the occasional weekend there.’

Her mother had often suggested to Ceres that she move to the cottage permanently instead of wasting money on rent in London, but Ceres hadn’t wanted to return. Going back to where she began would have felt like an admission of failure on her part, and there had been Phoebe’s school and circle of friends to consider as well. Now those things were no longer an issue. ‘Why?’

‘There is a care facility, a very good one, exclusively for young people, on the outskirts of Bletchley, with a considerable degree of specialisation in brain injury. It’s called the Lantern House, and a space has just opened up. My parents live in Milton Keynes, so I’m back and forth quite a bit, and I have a professional relationship with the Lantern. My suggestion, if you were amenable, would be to transfer Phoebe there as soon as is practical. She’ll be well looked after, I’ll be kept in the loop, and its status as a registered charity means that you won’t have that financial concern hanging over your head – not to the same degree, at least. Given the circumstances, the Lantern might be the best option for everyone. But we’re not giving up on Phoebe. You have to understand that.’

She nodded, but didn’t mean it. They *were* giving up on Phoebe here, or so it seemed to Ceres. And the word ‘charity’ stung, because she’d always paid her own way, and now it was what she and Phoebe were reduced to. She felt powerless, useless.

‘Let’s move her, then,’ she said.

And so it was done.

The evening had turned cold: November, and winter in the ascendant. Already, barely minutes after ending her conversation with Mr Stewart, Ceres was making plans to reorder her life. She wouldn’t particularly miss London, not any longer. She still consciously avoided the road on which Phoebe had been hit,

and the pall cast by the accident seemed to have spread from that small stretch of tarmac to all of South London and, by extension, the rest of the city. Whatever her reservations about Buckinghamshire, moving back there would help her escape one shadow, and a change of environment might even enable her to get back to work again.

The winter king on his throne, and all change in the realm.