

Gathering Day

by Natasha Kaeda



Eleri: Four days after he died, it was Gathering Day.

I stood on the backstep and looked into the hills.

FX: peaceful mid-summer birdsong, white noise from the river in the distance.

We had met on this day.

The first Monday after the solstice.

When the fields and the flowers - fed by the warmth of the sun, reach their peak and are gathered.

For later.

When the nights are long and the cold is in our bones.

Vervain picked before dawn.

All-seeing mistletoe untangled from the branches of the Pwllpriddog Oak.

The whole village - all who were able -

Walking to the top of the hill,

A bonfire a-light at dusk.

FX: crackle of fire, voices

Daf:

Give me back to it.

*Like the leaves that fall in the
autumn and come again in the
daffodils each spring,*

I'll be in the ebb of the breeze,

The disco of the stars.

Girl me - young in the bones and the head - had tucked mistletoe under her pillow,
hoping to see things of consequence high-up on the agenda for the rest of my life.

Nineteen years old and prone to reaching for the height of things.

A cairn.

A peak.

A trig point from which I could survey both my life and the land.

A valley scooped and split by ice. Folded, faulted. Rock laid down.

Lusting for that feeling of arrival.

The triumph of summiting.

But when is it that you arrive into your life?

Is it with the dawn of adulthood? When you hit your stride, gain accomplishments, and
in them find flashes of peace?

Or maybe it is found in the calming down of our twilight years, when the agenda is all but spent.

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FX - chatter from people of all ages, the rush of water close by

Gathering Day dawned bright and clear as the dragon's breath rolled away down the valley. The white of the horizon promising a day of high-summer heat.

We congregated on the bridge, shouting to be heard over the rush of the river, busy with yesterday's rain.

Daf: (raised voice) Nice day for it.

Eleri: Pardon?

Daf: I said that it's a nice day for it.

I had seen him around - at church sometimes, on hay-making days.

*Eleri: Oh.
Yes -*

Daf: It's going to be an absolute scorcher. Not that I'm complaining. All the better for a dip in the pools later.

I'm Daf, by the way.

Eleri: Eleri.

Daf: Like the river?

Eleri: Like my great-aunt.

He gestured to the basket at my elbow.

Daf: You collecting anything in particular?

Eleri: *Lavender, corn cockle. Small burdock for fever. Ivy for toothache. Pine cones for coughs and colds.*

Daf: *I'll keep my eye out then.*

I dared to wonder if the mistletoe had brought him to me.

FX: the rush of river noise and chatter subsides.

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FX: in the garden - mixed birdsong with more prominent robin calls.

The robin eyes me from the gate.

She sees me standing here alone,
Has noted his slow retreat from the garden, the chaos that has sprung up in the absence of his daily tending.

Robin: *What now?*

She lost all her nestlings to the cuckoo this spring.
Did she know?
We watched as the imposter pulled worms from her beak and wool over her eyes.

Either way, she loved it as if it were her own.

Robin: *What now?*
What now?

What now indeed.

I look to the hills.
We had told ourselves that our feet had grown too uncertain for the paths that we knew by heart.
And now he has gone and Gathering Day is here again.

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FX: mixed bird song remains but further off now. Footsteps on a dirt track.

Girl: *Hurry Eleri! You'll get left behind.*

He had business with every rock, every tree, every insect.

I collected wood sorrel and lemon balm because that is what I was there to do and never minded the green beetles, boring pin-tight holes into the track. But he insisted. Watch its mouth, its dragonfly iridescence in the sun. Naming it. Bringing it into the present each and every time I've seen them since.

What it is to know and be known.

FX: Eleri bends down to pick something. She puts it in her basket.

Daf: *Mugwort?*

Eleri: *For my Pa.
He says that it's good for his digestion but Ma reckons that if that was the case then he would drink it in a steep instead of smoking it in his pipe and falling asleep.*

FX: The sound of more plants being picked and put in the basket.

Daf: *I've seen you at church.*

Eleri: *I don't see you there very often.*

Daf: *It's a lot of talking and sitting still.*

Eleri: *And you're more of an wind-in-your hair type?*

Daf: *It's just easier to feel awe and wonder out here, don't you think? Rather than sitting in the cold, only being able to*

concentrate on my behind going numb.

But mostly I worry that I might go up in flames if I enter the place.

Eleri: Is that a possibility?

Daf: Maybe -

Eleri: That would be a shame. Seeing as we're only just getting to know each other.

Can you get that for me?

He reached for the brace of pine cones.
And the dappled sunlight on his temples made me feel alive.

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FX: a garden gate closing on its latch, a few tentative steps on concrete.

When we bought this place - newly wed, giddy on the joy of each other - there was no road, just a dirt track from here to the bridge.

The cottage was perfect - small, therefore easy to heat in the winter, with a backdoor facing out to the hills. Perfect, aside from the family of mice who ran riot in the kitchen each night.

*Daf: They were here before us!
They were included in the price!*

I borrowed a cat called Duchess and soon after the dirt track became a road. Concrete poured unceremoniously up to the boundary of the hawthorn which, at the time, felt like a savage hemming in. But now at 87, my feet are relieved by the certainty that it brings.

We grew into our lives together.
Learnt the habit of our shared routines.
Cups of tea early each morning before his round began.
Walks come rain or shine at the weekend,

Delighting in the raw joy of spring, or gasping as the valley turned from green to gold and orange and purple each autumn.
Many July evenings spent bottling cordials of elder and raspberry.
A taste of warmer days as the earth turned and The Plough poured winter down on us from cold, clear skies once again.

There were times when we misjudged, misinterpreted each other.
When expectations were not met.
But they passed.

I did odd jobs here and there - mending, caring, helping out at the school until my belly began to swell.
I was picking radishes in the garden when my waters broke.
Panicked by the weight of everything that was about to push out of me, I looked to the sky for help and saw the first swallow of the year.

Eleri: *We'll call her Summer!*

Three long long days, I cursed, I cried, I screamed.
He held my hand, my hair, a glass of water to my lips.
While my mother busied in and out.
Raspberry leaf tea for the pain.
Chamomile balm on my temples for strength.

But one swallow does not a summer make.
And it wasn't until a team of them danced in the sky that she burst out into the world.

Daf: *Our sweet girl.*

We knew nothing of how to be parents.

Daf: *Can I hold her like this?*

Eleri: *Hands here, head here.*

And each evening once his round was complete, he would carry her up the hill on his back, pointing out the tracks made by hares.
The three of us skimming dappy stones on the river as the skittish mackerel sky turned pink above us.

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FX: a stick, helping a single pair of footsteps

From the gate behind the pub, I will have to take it slower.
The slope steepens, the path loose and wet as it winds through the trees.
Here the river runs hell-for-leather down the hill, eager to find the sea.
And if I go, it'll be the sea for me too.

Perhaps it would have been sensible to have told someone what I was doing?
To have called Summer and told her that I wanted to take a walk up the hill.
Wait for me - she'd have said - *I'll come with you.*
But I don't want her fusing.

The last of the ash.
Red kites rising above.

Where are the green beetle's pin-sized holes now?
Too small for my tired eyes?

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FX: two sets of footsteps on a dirt trail

We emerge from the woods onto the lower slopes of the hill, trailing far behind the rest of the group.

Up ahead my friends giggle at our slowness.

I tuck handfuls of heather into the corners of my basket and turn back to see the slopes of Picws Du monumental in the light and shadow of the sun.

Eleri: *Do you think that you have arrived into your life?*

Daf: *What do you mean?*

Eleri: *I mean - will you know when you have got to where you are meant to be?*

Daf: *I don't think that you ever arrive into yourself?*

*Maybe you do, right at the start
and then life is just a journey
back to where you came from.*

Eleri: Which is where?

*Daf: The soil? The roots of a tree.
The wind through the valley - I
don't know.
But in a bit, we will reach the
top of this hill and join the
others that live with us in this
place.
The fire will be a-light to greet
us. Maybe there will be some
singing. And food and drink.
And after, you will take the
mugwort back home and your
Pa will smoke it. I will walk
back, the scent of lavender in
the air - thinking of you and this
nice day that we've had. And for
me, that is enough.*

I turn from the slopes of Picws Du and reach up to kiss him.
Bracken catches around our legs, making our knees wet with dew.

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FX: the sound of a toddler laughing.

Summer grew into herself.
She was strong and lovely.
Her questions endless.

*Summer: Will Stanley die before me?
How many trees are there in the
world?
Why is water wet?*

Stanley was our cockerel.
Fewer trees than there were before..

Because it is.

But he took her seriously.

Daf:

*Water is wet because you
feel it to be, not because it is
wet itself.
Close your eyes.
If I place this stone on the back
of your hand. How does it feel?*

Summer:

Wet! Cold!

And so she grew up with his gift of noticing.

Counting the shades of brown in a buzzard's feather.

Naming boletes that push out of the woodland floor.

Echoing the croak of the nightjar.

Listening in wild, lonely places until she grew from girl to woman and longed for something other than this life that was ours.

Summer:

*There's nothing to do here.
Everything is happening
elsewhere.*

I saw him wince at the thought that it might not be enough.

The broken spectre of a life we had hoped for her, the three of us together, becoming harder and harder to see.

I prised his fingers loose, showing him how to let go.

Eleri:

*What will she do? She is not us.
She is not you.*

We packed her bags full of burdock and lemon balm and off she went in search of her own life to build.

And in the quiet of those Summer-less years, I once again notice the dawn light on his cheek as we lie in at the weekend.

FX: drunken singing at the pub

He retires with a knees up at the pub - karaoke until the early hours of the morning. Tom Jones rolling in his grave.
We stumble home as the owls court each other in the skies above.

FX: pub noises fade. The eerie call of tawny owls at night.

(imitating the twit-twoo of a pair of tawny owls)

Eleri: Twit -

Daf: Who-me?

The mice move back in and this time I leave them be.

We walk daily, then weekly.
Our hair fades to match the pale swathes of tussock.
Feverfew - the leaves dried and steeped in tea - for the stiffness in our joints.
Summer starts to call more, visit more once again.
A sign that she too is noticing the rush of time.
I cannot hold it fast enough.
He begins to cross the stream slower, with a stick.
Then none at all.

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FX: footsteps on a dirt track

*Daf: Perhaps we can do this again
sometime?*

Eleri: I'd like that.

*Daf: There are always many more
walks to take.*

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FX: bonfire, a celebration

We reach the summit, hand in hand.

The bonfire is already lit. Baskets full, they will see us through the winter.

Up here, the rest of the world is far away.

If I could just hold you still.

Disco grass catches around our ankles, making us wretch and drag like plows over an unforgiving field.

He looks at me. What a day it has been.

We lie down. The rock of the hills beneath us. Blue sky above.

He had become old. And so am I.

Knowing another is endless.

The final days were so quiet.

His breath - trapped in his mouth like a moth by the artificial light of a lamp - suddenly flew off silently into the night. Free to reach for the moon.

And he was gone.

It has taken me all day. I ache at the seams.

They have lit a fire at the trig.

I turn and look down upon the valley of my life.

Mistletoe will not bring him to me now.

But I have known him, as I know this place. Widely. With a depth that grows with knowing.

The words I have for him, a drop in the mountain pools. Kind. Resourceful. Affectionate.

I have known him as I know this place.

And by that, I mean we have interacted constantly, routinely, everyday of this life.

Known, but not conquered.

The flames dance. For you, for us.

They tell me that you are in the foxgloves.

In the bees.

In the honey.

I will put it on my toast and be with you again.

That you are out there - in the river and the hills.
Every rock.
Every insect.
Every tree.

Everything is beautiful and I am so sad to have arrived here without you.

Arriving over and over again. Each and every day.

I might not have known this life widely, but I have known it deeply.

FX: the river rises to a crescendo and then falls to a silence

The End.