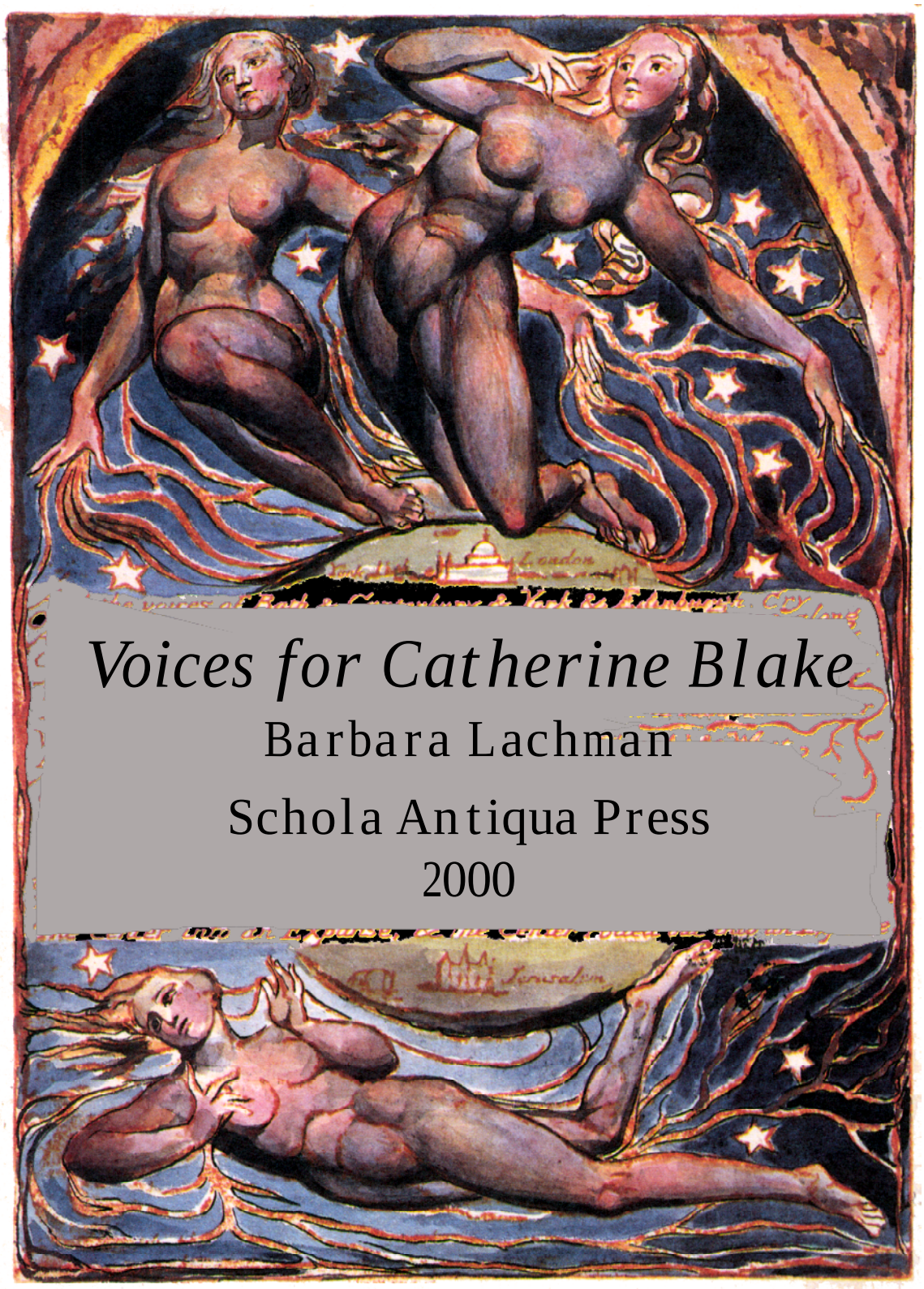

Voices for Catherine Blake

Barbara Lachman

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To

Eleanor Provost

Artist and Printmaker

The front cover reproduces the illustration on plate 57 of William Blake's *Jerusalem*; the back, the illustration for the title page of *The Book of Ahania.* The frontispiece is a portrait of Catherine Blake after a drawing made by William around 1803.

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Some Dates in the Life of Catherine Blake

1761	Catherine Sophia Boucher born in Battersea
1782	married to William Blake 18 August; moved to 23 Greene Street, Leicester Fields
1784	moved to 27 Broad Street, Golden Square
1787	moved to 28 Poland Street
1791	moved to 13 Hercules Buildings, Lambeth.
1800	September, moved to Felpham, near Chichester, Sussex
1803	August, quarrel with Trooper Scofield of the Royal Dragoons
	September, returned to London, living briefly with James Blake on Broad Street, then to 17 South Molton Street
1804	11 January, the Trial for Sedition at Chichester Assizes
1821	moved to 3 Fountain Court, Strand
1827	12 August, William Blake died
	September, moved to Cirencester Place, Fitzroy Square, studio of John Linnell
1828	summer, moved to 20 Lisson Grove North, home of Mr & Mrs Frederick Tatham
c. 1829	moved to 17 Charlton Street, Fitzroy Square
1831	died 18 October, 7:30 a.m., at 17 Charlton Street

There were no dreams to begin with for me, only sisters and brothers, animals and smells of growing, market gardening in Battersea, chores that repeat with the seasons. At birth, the name I received was Catherine Sophia Boucher; the forename, a common one for English women in the last century which proved to be that of my spouse's mother and sister as well. Today, if you were to notice me at all on a crowded street in London, you would think me little more than an old woman, slowing down all those people pressed for time. But you will find me the repository of no ordinary life.

The life was housed in our bodies as well as our brains. So I must be the window, or several windows, through which you have a glimpse of what Will and I together have lived. For all the while the world raged with one revolution after another—in America, in France, and nearly in England itself with its angry tide against monarchy and privilege and slavery all rolled into a hungry mob yelling for bread in its capital city of London—all the while that was just background for our life that was being created before ever it could be dreamed.

William Blake, poet and engraver, died without heirs and without the rich following and wide readership we always hoped he might have. But our life continues, tho not in funds which were at almost all times absent. He left me some copper plates, etched lines, relief printings, fevered poems and realized visions, examples of the work that was our life. You can see in the figures that they move from within. Mostly they are naked, showing even the muscles that propel their bones. They sit and stand and move through space, all in one, relishing their freedom or being punished themselves for lack of it. If the figures have eyes, it is not for gazing at you but for piercing some deep and terrible truth you may not wish to know. And not just know: Will's figures surround and intertwine with words, a text that is a song. As I heard them, they were sung to me.

All that I have just described was my very education. So was it Will's who pursued it in his active study of the ancient sculptors, the Italian Renaissance painters he sought out in antique galleries, working for years as apprentice to an engraver, collecting copies of the ancients in a modest way, all to the purpose of rendering what burst his poor brain and ran with the blood of his body. But I was simply immersed in it all as our living. My education was the work itself, the actual renderings, the doing of it, for I thankfully became active participant.

In fact, before Will and I were married, I was virtually without education at all. I could neither read nor write. Among the leavings of our life together are my first attempts at writing shortly after our marriage in 1782:

> Mr Blake has me write short sentences.
>
> He has me write whole sentences.

Catherine

This is the note book that Catherine writes.

Catherine Blake writes and lives here with Wm Blake the engraver at 27 Broad Street.

The first time I saw my William, I was terribly young. It was from inside my father's shed at Battersea, seated on a milking stool I must have been. I remember the odd angle of seeing his face. It was mostly all eyes, and they glittered and burned. I had never seen eyes like his before, certainly not in my family, none of the animals, not even among all the faces I saw on market days in London. I was always looking, whether proper or no. Mother had warned me of consequences of too much frank looking, but I did.

Mr Blake's eyes, viewed from below, from the milking stool, were full on marvelous events, paraded only for him. I know that now as I write it down, but at the time I just looked and wondered. For one thing, I couldn't write then, nor did I read. Later I would meet eyes like that in Mr Milton's poetry, when William read aloud to me. Later still, I read about such things myself, but at the time I may have heard some Biblical prophet roaring or a soldier describing a battle. Certainly I could never imagine the events of regular life on such a grand scale as transfigured Will's face in that state.

Still less could I imagine myself moving in such a landscape. Then I knew only I would choose him if I could. I wondered whether my skin would be warmed being seen by Mr Blake's eyes. I saw him first; he hadn't really looked at me yet.

Mrs Blake, it sounds as though you had very modest beginnings, with no real expectations about your life. Then you met the man who became your husband and things quite suddenly changed. I think I understand what it means to have your whole person respond to another in that way. In my experience it has something to do with what we think of as the "chemistry" between two people. It's quite a sexual thing, and it's also more than that. Would you agree?

Catherine Blake: What you say makes sense in my case. My person was so deeply and immediately touched by Will that something in me began unfolding that I didn't even know existed, and it just continued to unfold and open through time. The poets might say his touch wounded me deeply, fired desire in heart, mind, and body. And of course in my soul as well; you know, whatever else the soul is, it is most surely one with the body.

Can we go back for a minute to your growing-up years? Can you tell us more about your life before you met William Blake?

I doubt it will be easy for you to understand my life before William; it is barely perceptible to me. Picture a very young woman perched like Narcissus on the edge of a pool, but there is no reflection. Or think of someone even younger, a young girl, working her father's vegetable garden in Battersea. It is the beginning of February and she longs after the sun the way a plant does, seeking it with her whole being. Yet, when it shines on her, she casts no shadow, even though the sun shines strong and slant-angled.

Did you think you were happy in those days, as you were growing up?

I surely was not unhappy, nor could I say I was really a thinking child. More like plants I suspect. We were very many; mother had one, sometimes two children each year, for many years. Those of us who survived needed food and places to sleep; we grew and needed clothing to warm us. We had neither time nor the inclination for reflection. My father, being something of a Dissenter, held opinions, I am sure, but he rarely shared them at home with his rampant children or his exhausted wife. No, I suspect he aired what opinions he held when he visited the pub on market days in London. There was his relief.

So your childhood was not an easy one, but one of hard work and little personal attention. But what about those rare times when you weren't working? What did you do then?

I listened a great deal as a child, to all kinds of things. Bird sounds in the out-of-doors, street cries in the City, arguments that went on around me, public ranting in favor of freedom and against kings, screams from pain, giggles and groans in lovemaking, my ears caught everything.

Wm says if he can learn to read Greek, as he hopes, I can learn to read English. At first it made me angry, all the hard trying. It made me feel so helpless without being able to actually do anything. Only all the looking with my eyes, noticing where the spacings were, and which letters belonged with which word.

Next day when I balk he says If I can read backwards you can sure read forward. He is constantly thinking nowadays about improving his new process so that his written verse will be part of the picture and the plate. But does this go backward in time? Before Gutenberg and loose type, some printers must have made wood blocks for pages with text and pictures together on the same block. And gave it up for too much work and far too slow. And then those words and pictures are stuck together, so the picture can't be used without it, by itself as illustration for

anything else. This is fine says Will for that is just what I intend—that the text and picture are in fact one whole that cannot be divided or thought of except as part of the larger whole. As for being like the Middle Ages, that's also no shame for Will. He says he admires the spirit those scribes showed in their decorations and hand-lettered texts.

I then tell Will, returning to his boast about backward and forward reading (which I know he said to encourage me) that backward or forward it makes no difference in the reading, one looks about as mysterious as the other. Just at that moment, when we are both about to burst with frustration, Will comes up with the idea I should learn to read through writing, and everything changes. One leads to the other, and in no time the writing has me reading as well. It must be the doing of it that made all the difference. I see now in hindsight what Will was able to see at the time.

For the first few tries he guided my hand physically in its turnings and simple formations, so I felt the joy of sure beginnings and endings to things as we sounded them. What joy for me to feel it happening under my hands! I was doing it, or it was doing it. No matter. Some words flowed and joined from my hand.

Everything changed and continues to change from this one process. Will says Of course, we don't think one word at a time, but in ideas of joined sentences. It is of this I am not so sure when I think back. I wonder whether I thought in ideas at all, before. First my head was filled more with pictures than thoughts, pictures mostly from what already surrounded me, but not without some dreams as well. Next were the feelings, and I'm not sure they were in words either, joined or unjoined. In my core I might be warm or cold, tired or filled with energy, hopeful or discouraged. Those were not ideas as I know them now to be.

For me, the real thinking world started in earnest with the writing. I had already guessed at it from Will. From the first time I saw him and even more when he actually saw and put his concentration on me. It's as if a light grew or a flower budded or a fruit ripened. I knew there was a great mystery to be tasted. The real unfolding began with the writing.

Early in our life together came Robert, Mr Blake's brother, younger by ten years. Already sainted in Wm's eyes when I first met him, Robert was frequent visitor to our rooms in Greene Street and spent more and more time under our roof once the father had died.

It had been clear to me from the beginning that Wm's parents had had higher hopes for their son's wife. Not that the father, James Blake by name and a hosier by trade, ever voiced disappointment or criticism in my presence. And the mother, another Catherine, was cold and quiet by nature, her face nearly without expression. Some other way I perceived the disappointment, especially in the case of father James. He had in many ways favored Wm, who was not the first born, but third

son. From early youth Wm had his father's backing for his artistic calling. Not only did James support his son's artistic training by sending him early to Paris School for drawing and then apprentice him at fourteen to Basirer, a highly competent engraver. In addition he somehow managed to fund Wm's early purchases for a steadily growing collection of art works. Many of the prints Wm collected and saved for a lifetime were out of fashion in England then, therefore undervalued and purchasable at modest price. Nevertheless, they were expenses of both money and time that Will's father supported.

There was never any attempt to make a hosier of Will, for his oldest brother continued the father's name, trade, and position in the hosiery shop even before the father's death. No, the expectations for Wm were always imbedded in art and followed a kind of remarkable self-definition. Whatever the hopes James Blake allowed himself regarding Wm's intended spouse, they were out of love and caring for this his most unusual son. Possibly he hoped she would have a dowry that would sustain his son's talent. Or it could have been social standing he wished for, a woman at ease and sought after in grand houses whose pristine, towering, and numberless walls would benefit from lovely engraved portraits and emblems.

None of which I brought—and both Will and I felt his keen disappointment. Thus it was not until the death of Will's father that we leased a house with shop for selling prints on the ground floor situated next door to the Broad Street family house.

There Robert was increasingly a boarder, or, more accurately, angel in residence. Will adored him, and his beauty was fair and unquestionable. Robert was thought to have artistic talent, and Will encouraged his drawing. He had him sketching, and Will tirelessly reviewed the work and gave warm praise.

By this time, I was the one wanted Will's tutelage whole. I had by this time lived for two years among art works and artists of more and less talent, and I was anxious to learn. Now I had knowledge sufficient to be embarrassed by my lack of skills. I wanted to better my scarcely rudimentary reading and writing. I had begun to keep the shop downstairs, shared between Will and a former colleague and fellow apprentice by the name of Parker. I had devised reasonable methods for keeping track of sales, computing simple figures, and filing signatures. I needed more, and a maddening change was transpiring in my desire for Will's attention: I was jealous.

Education began soon enough, and not with hornbook or any other such trappings as school masters use to catechize the young. Mr. Blake surrounded me. The rooms we let at Broad Street were spare of furnishings, but carefully arranged for what I came to know as *the work*. I must to work, Kate, he would announce at our tea in the morning at a certain point. This plate needs

work. You'll see, the next pull will have more depth. I am working on an idea for printing text and image as one operation. —And all the while we two might be inside, in one room, even sitting on chairs.

In my family, work meant hard exercise, mostly out of doors, digging in dirt, planting sets and seeds, protecting as best one could from unwonted weather or eking out water in drought. Lugging pails, staking out climbers, hauling the produce, cutting stalks. Even indoors, work had to do with moving about—scurrying to set out the food, feed or bank the cooking fire—it all had to do with exercising arms and legs in some kind of unthought order, of exhausting oneself with repetition of movements. The urgency was "before it rains," "before the frost gets it," "so we get a good stall at the market."

At first, and to a stranger as I realize now I surely was, Mr Blake's work appeared to be indolence: so much of it was sitting down, was quiet, without orders given or followed, without observable schedule. Complexities there were aplenty. If Will was preparing a plate, for instance, timing and application of the ground were crucial, and he was always working out new recipes for the mixture. The engraving part itself—biting into the plate, and just to the right amount—was slow and deliberate with small, light tools that fit so perfectly in his hands they seemed like his own fingers. But the deeper part of the work was a kind of waiting. It does little good to talk about it. It is the way one lives, by nature as in Will's case, enhancing it at every opportunity, or learning slowly to choose it, to coax it, as I did over time.

At the beginning, in the first months and more, perhaps even years, I was jealous also of this thing. Suddenly, and out of nowhere, he would quietly up and to his table. With pencil in hand, he would begin. It might be verses or sketches in his note book, or it could be the drawing itself that he would scratch directly onto the plate, which was already waxed in preparation for whatever the waiting produced. Usually it unfolded from silence, but I have seen it happen with Will just at a time when someone thought to be conversing with him. It could happen as well when we two were just talking, and that was an occasion for jealousy.

It was inner landscape Will cultivated, waited for. Almost the way we slowly lick our two lips when we are hungry and smell fresh bread baking, or chafe our own arms to direct the warmth of the coal fire to our bodies on a damp day. Just that quietly and naturally did he catch passing spirits and wonders that others missed or couldn't see. I venture it the most important part of his life. It had the strongest claim on him, and it caused me no end of trouble at the beginning.

At the time Will and I met, he had lately suffered rejection from a woman he had courted. This I knew right from the first, for Wm was always direct and honest, even if telling the true story would seem to reflect some loss in him. As our life together progressed, I was many times to witness this frankness about his condition, relating exactly what transpired in breast or Imagination. It could as easily be directed at another—a person's cloying taste or curtailed understanding. He would then offend his listener, stunning him even, in his blunt statement of what Mr Blake knew to be a true assessment.

This could happen in the simplest way: a statement directed at someone whose short-sightedness so offended Will that he was obliged to express it without caution, sometimes not just in word, but in writing where it could not easily be dismissed by the recipient, fixed forever on the page.

"I really am sorry that you are fall'n out with the Spiritual World," he once began a letter to a man of the cloth who had ordered some water-colours. This clergyman fancied himself an exemplar of moral matters and ordered paintings in two pairs: one pair was to be labeled Malevolence and Benevolence; the other, Pride and Humility. No doubt he offered suggestions to Will, or, what was even worse, had some notion that Will's water-colours would exactly replicate his own crimped views.

The first one was submitted by itself for the reverend's response. Will had chosen Malevolence, in which a lovely young couple with child between them is bathed in moonlight as two supposed friends crouch nearby, malevolent envy written on their faces and bodies, waiting to assassinate the beauty they witness. The Rev Dr Trusler cancelled his commission and let William know he found nothing spiritual in the painting. This same man, author of such works as *The Way to Be Rich and Respectable*, thus aroused one of Will's direct and frank responses that underline the poverty of those who fail to express themselves from the World of Imagination and Vision: "I see Every thing I paint In This World, but Every body does not see alike. To the Eyes of a Miser a Guinea is more beautiful than the Sun, & a bag worn with the use of Money has more beautiful proportions than a Vine filled with Grapes. The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the Eyes of others only a Green thing that stands in the way." If such an expression seems to exceed some invisible boundaries of polite discourse, remember that Mr Blake was without guile.

The story he told at our first meeting was at my request: his eyes were so filled with agitation and suffering that I asked, "Mr Blake, something sorely troubles you. Can we not make you comfortable in our house?"

"I did not come here to escape trouble, Miss Boucher. It goes where I go." I at first persisted in trying to put him at ease as remedy to this intensity, offering next a glass of cold cider, as I recall.

"Thirst has nothing to do with what gnaws at me. I have been unjustly scorned." Then he proceeded to tell me the story—how badly she had treated him and the suffering it caused his person. In truth others of my family were present, but it felt as though he was telling the story to me alone. As he spoke, I was in his gaze, and it was just as I had suspected earlier at my first view of him: as though my body had become a stove being stoked with coal by his presence. I could feel warmth just move through each segment of my body. I might have been radiating or changing colours with it. It was that palpable to my senses. Then the heat escaped me.

"From my own heart, Mr Blake, I pity you."

"Do you pity me?"

"Most sincerely, yes, I pity you."

"Then I love you for it, Catherine."

It happened just that quickly, our life together chosen in the first encounter. Before Wm left the house, we were pledged, and only his determination to secure a place for us to live and funds to support it determined a waiting time. Within the year we were married.

She loved the smallest details of his physical presence: the right-hand fingers around the graver, never any strain or grasping at tools, the curved digits like fine teacup handles. Surety and freedom were his hands. Perhaps more so than his mind which, loving freedom as well, nevertheless sometimes reduced thoughts to circles that repeated dangerously. He might start a clear thought in his head, move along, then find himself looping back to just one portion of the thought. It would then wear a track for itself, this curving, and a very faint bell go off along with each course. So eventually the loop submerged any forward progressing thought, and he was stuck.

Here she was helpful. Not directly altering the track, nor distracting his thought, nor even calming his mind. More a quality it was, a sympathy, a Knowing the Direction where the repetition consented to unravel itself. Taking the hand of beauty, placing it on age-striped softness of the skin between cheekbone and jaw, familiar even in age. Other times, his hand elsewhere, on nipple, buttock, the small of her back, was comfort mutual while retracing curves. His eye then clear and gaze less murderous, the work recommenced.

The writing backward, letters reversed, direction without mirroring, required his free, practiced hand without tracks; it was his poetry that etched itself, after all. Still she had to ask him what he heard as he carved thus. Was there a whole language of lyrics sung through a mirror in his mind, and did that music travel its own reversals, intervals upside down from high to low with cadence-beginnings and embarking notes the last?

His answer came so in earnest with effort to describe the sound he heard: simply, "yes."

Somehow Will finds money for books. Our eyes so weary from plates and other paraphernalia of making books all day, we rest them by reading at night. Often we read to each other; then one, at least, has eyes at rest.

It used to be that Mr Blake was always the reader and I the receiver of the words, though even then he would sometimes have me read aloud to him. He said it was for the sense of rhetoric it taught me. Novels were best for me, the different voices of characters sounding real, giving reason to pauses, that is commas, and question marks. I would get lost in long descriptions, even those about nature, which in its own form I love. Will had just so much patience and I had limits to skill with long clauses and inner thoughts. In truth he had more patience with me than I the faith I'd improve, that prose could grow easier, more like food than hard work. How I would struggle in those days! Had we offspring, I doubt I would have had the patience instructing them to read and write that Will showed toward me. All those who know him as a man not suffering fools should feel his patience when he loves.

And how he loved to read aloud to me, declaim. Not only Milton's poems or his own, for verse was his delight. Even those long passages of prose I mentioned earlier would come alive when he read them—a wave with separate phrases, clauses, pauses, points of rest but motion too, all at once and breaking like a wave at sea that breaks not quite where you'd expect, a form of sounds combined.

When he came to his own, it was sometimes song, his voice enchanting me more.

These passed such happy days. Filled with Will's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* from end to end, then some more by candlelight some nights.

I can see in his face he is elsewhere in his world. Then of a sudden his eyes light on me, and he says I am vital to this printing. *Vital* is the word he uses. It pleases me. Then back we go to the work for hours on end without speaking but with a rhythm I can now feel. Together we make the rhythm out of everything—hands, light, eyes, paints, paper, movements around the press. It is nearly like a dance, with the long deep pauses for the painting, the colouring. And always the unexpected, the surprises when the printed paper emerges with its own suggestions for furthering this and that colour or shape.

Occasionally we have been interrupted in the shop from our high fever of work. More a disruption than interruption it seems, for then the rhythm is spoiled, sometimes for the whole rest of the day. Once an artist friend of Will's comes by, will not interrupt, just to sit and watch this new method of relief printing, both image and text in one, he says. Then sit you quietly, warns Mr Blake,

and say nothing to us. And so it goes for some while, till, I suppose, visitor's stomach tells the hour and he is reminded of his lunch. Will and I stop rarely for much of anything when these projects are upon us. At day's end we eat and notice no hunger in between. But Will's friend suddenly murmurs, "It's a wonder you have no servant." Then, looking quite directly at me, for I feel it without looking, and approaching my working hands again he says louder, "I say, you could do with a servant to fix you some food as you work."

I reply without thinking, "We do not prosper that way. Our work does not prosper with a servant in the house." I wonder whether Will might ask me to serve the man some refreshment, but no, he simply states that we cannot eat and work at the same time nor can we talk and work for that matter. Our visitor leaves.

I, suddenly embarrassed at the boldness of my speaking out, cover my heating cheeks and brow with hands all smudged with colors, mostly the brown ink but also with others I've acquired over the morning hours. As I begin to mumble some words of apology, Will suddenly looks up, enjoyment widens his eyes and bubbles out as wild laughter, "Kate, you are truly my printer's devil!" I laugh as well without knowing why, just catching the fun from him. When he sees I am still bewildered, he snatches our good glass and, still shaking with laughter, shows me my face all covered with dark smudges from ear to ear. "Your printer's devil am I," I agree.

Only later in bed did it occur to us that our visitor probably thought I was speaking of money when I said we do not prosper with a servant. Which is not what I meant to say. It is more this other thing, this rhythm we can often weave when our work together moves well. It does not happen when a third person is under our roof.

Captain Stedman's book has been Mr Blake's main project now for some months. It promises some income, which we desperately need, though Will hates to hear me harp on that. I do wonder at Mr Stedman when I see all the bold-bodied women he has drawn. I thank the Lord I am not married to an adventurer like that, meaning a man who must travel to wild places to be stirred.

It is hard for me to imagine him as the same man who stays with us when he comes into London and seems such a contented guest. He and Will share quite a rare friendship and yet they are such different men. Will counts him as an unusually loyal friend and admires his mind. He respects Stedman's care to understand people of other colours, the gifts of people without benefit of our civilized habits. (Will is convinced that our civilized institutions strangle our minds and deaden our Imaginations.)

Captain Stedman of course is eager to have us read the page-proofs as soon as they come from Mr Johnson's press. But Will does did not read the text before cutting any of the engravings, so we

leave the proofing to the writer. Will claims Capt Stedman's drawings themselves spoke volumes to him. In addition, the two men have conversed now so often and Stedman never tires of telling his adventures.

He reminds me somewhat of Mary Wollstonecraft, for she is surely an adventuress, tho it takes a different form in a woman, regardless of her proclamations about equality. I can hardly pretend I have no jealousy at her friendship with Will or his appreciation of the way the she thinks and expresses herself. As time went on though there was some change. I began to hear him influenced by some of her libertine ideas. I know he is himself a very free thinker, possessed of radical thoughts about organized religion, the structure of government, the rights of man, and so on. He has always admired my body in a way that would scandalize my own mother and most of Battersea if I had any reason to tell them. Nevertheless, it brings me nothing but chaos to contemplate MW in our household in any capacity under my roof at all. I finally forced myself to admit it to Will, for I have grown astute over time about his thinking and feel sure she was beginning to persuade him of some of her personal ideas that were not his own.

That was partly the argument I presented to Will, and it was persuasive. My husband has a healthy pride in the originality of this own thoughts. He despises labels and would not allow himself to be lumped with any group. When I pointed out some specific ideas he espoused as having originated with MW, it gave him pause. I thought I was very clearheaded about it all, but who knows? Will is surprisingly sensitive to real distress in my words. Besides, I know there was some unfamiliar withholding in my body as we grappled with this that pained us both.

As soon as we had closed the shop for the day, Will and I took off for a walk. We headed for the Thames, I spying and crowing over the blooms along the way. Untended, they pop up everywhere with their colours.

Mostly blue and yellow this May afternoon I noticed, their names sifting pleasantly through my head. The blues are more interesting and begin to take on some fluorescence as afternoon lengthens to evening. Under oaks we passed a big group of Solomon's Seal, long drooping arched stems hung with perfect-spaced rows of delicate bells gazing down. The bells are blossoms nearly without color in this light, so greenish white. Flowers seemed to be everywhere, and this is not to count planted gardens before cottages, just the wild blooms, undomesticated along the foot path.

Will and I look a bit wild and vagrant ourselves, I noticed as we walked, for my hands were still stained with the brown ink from today's pull. That after scrubbing, and Will's one shirt sleeve sporting spots of the same chestnut brown.

Not important, Will would have said and dismissed it, had I spoken aloud about the stains. I have learned he doesn't like it when I bring a narrow-focused critical eye on our persons. He is always urging me to expand my view. His friends think that if Will is not engaged at work with his tools, or arguing his political stance, or assessing particular shades and colours, that his whole mind is withdrawn to inner contemplations. But it is not the case. They simply have not observed him in his fullness as I do. When we take these long walks, for example, his eyes take in the sweep of everything. In fact all of his senses are bristling at the same time, and he is apt to notice foul garbage smells that set him describing a large problem, as much as coal smoke from some factory that smarts our eyes and sets him raving against the industries that crush human labor.

On one occasion I remarked that when we stroll out his eyes create landscapes while mine do still lifes. He gave me his good laugh for this observation and was pleased that I now could myself observe how I tend to seize on particulars rather than allowing my eyes to take in the whole picture.

Nevertheless it was Will himself who first noticed the particular prize of this walk. We approached the river as dusk was settling in around us, so those wisps of smoky fog were transparent but visible in the dimming light. A pair of swans floated past, and we stopped to admire their curved forms and the way they so perfectly moved in tandem, tho our admiring was wordless as their communicating was silent. (I can tell now when we are thinking the same thing, by something that passes between our two bodies.) Suddenly Will asks what is the black thing sticking out from the wing feathers, but I haven't seen it.

He says it's gone then again he sees, but this time different and I see too, almost like a tiny foot or beak poking out from the great curve of back-swept wings. The huge bird gives a graceful shrug, readjusts, and whatever we saw disappears. We wait, and it is ever harder to see as light is now so dim, but soon we can see it again, this time coal-sooty black against the milky wing. We realize it must be the baby offspring, a cygnet protected by the folded embrace of the parent wing. Mr Blake whispers, "Keep me as the apple of thine eye: hide me under the shadow of thy wings, from the wicked that oppress me, from my deadly enemies who compass me about."

Even Will has understood something anew.

My thoughts on the return run to offspring. By this time it is very dark and something unpleasant chews at the back of my mind.

A very strange thing has happened. I should say two things, and they are both so intertwined and one so floating free from space or time, it is hard to determine the order for telling. I

find a whole set of events may be combined in my thinking and held that way with ease. When I determine to write them in sentences, to narrate them, I must first tease them apart and give them a certain order. This is not only difficult but also delicate and may even change things from their origins not intended, because the narrative order makes one event seem to be the cause of another, whereas in truth the two merely dwelt together in a felt experience.

Back to the two strange things. The wings of *America* have touched me. Now I've said the things as they feel to exist together in experience. Next I will attempt to narrate them as if the two were separate.

This morning as I made a trial pull for the frontispiece of Will's new book, and actually saw it, still wet and light-catching, my whole insides lurched so sharply I felt I would fall. I looked away for a minute until balance returned, then gazed again. I looked with similar result but not so jarring, so I did not need to avert my gaze. The feeling was strong, and now I was sure as my eyes roamed the strange sculpted landscape, it was the wings. See their power here, and the word *sculpted* comes back, because the wings have depth & roundness & volume. It is not simply a matter of perspective, as Will has been showing and instructing how that works. These are wings that move forward from out of the picture and continue to move and are living.

Then I recollect the second thing or the other thing, because the order itself is a question. It was two mornings before this and barely light, just the first bird sounds, Will and I in bed, in the slow coupling I have grown so deeply to love. The pictures come with his stroking, a white bird—large—whose wings spread and flutter each time round the belly-breast.

This repeats as in a dance. Then all grows completely dark and still behind my closed eyes. Slowly, very slowly emerge two long and powerful wings as of dark stone. They are not really separate from the darkness, but just folds of it. But they emerge and, tho stone, they move ever so slowly. They are touching both of us in a way that could be fearful they are so huge and dark but it does not hurt in the touching. I say touching for I know clearly these wings have been in physical contact. I was moved and joyfully shaken and intended to tell William later in the day, because they were in contact with us both & I need to know if he remembers or felt as I did.

Later never came. We were both busy, or the words weren't there and the feeling subsided within. Then, this morning, suddenly appear the very pair of wings, and now I see these wings of *America* are not of stone as they were when they touched me, but something even deeper about them is identical. They move me just *to look* at them as they moved me in our bed. I wonder are they William's wings, those on the metal plate, or is there some other pair of wings that touched each of us, and how are these conjoined?

This city reeks with fear, hunger, foment. They execute more people in Paris, and men in London grow wilder. A smell of danger is everywhere, yet anyone who finds a few pounds prints a broadside filled with bold mockery. The images engraved are ugly and exaggerated. Nothing is sacred in these broadsides, and I am thankful we are in no way involved in their engraving or printing. Everyone we know devours them like animal fodder, and when they pass through our hands we have our bitter laughter like the rest.

If there is any text to speak of, it is only to fan our outrage, court sedition trials and punishment. I would not have needed to learn to read for the sake of these broadsides because the pictures tell the whole story. Not that I have any illusions about what it was to live in a state of ignorance. That is simply a different kind of fear, more like helplessness. How many men and women in this city seek the company of mobs as medicine for the isolation they suffer, aimless like one in a school of fish?

At least we are not executing with such glee. Mr Tom Paine returns from Paris with first hand details of horrors, barely escaping intact himself. How they hate their king and hate anything at all to do with monarchy. Apparently Mr Robespierre rebaptizes Notre Dame into a Temple of Reason. In Paris they worship and then grow mad with reason. And once they have tired of killing one another, will they then cross the narrow channel and turn on us? It would not be the first time, and always war is a good diversion for acute shortages of food and safety. I have no doubt the city of Paris is more extreme than the city of London, and I am glad we are too poor for Mr Blake even to

consider joining his friends in their desire to witness the unfolding of revolution in France. Besides, he knows better than all of them the madness of reason.

Not that they listen or understand his message, which is more subtle than all their broadsides. Will's poetry comes from his breast and not his head. People can buy his books cheaply enough, and we both thought surely the demand would come for us to run the plates for many more copies. They do not incite bitter laughter from people, because Will's intention is of a different sort. The images we hand-colour speak in bodies and trees filled with noble beauty and honest pain. They are infused with all of his life force and are not concerned with the kind of political murder imposed quickly from the outside.

All is bitter taste when he is sad. The round world squares and makes corners of despair. Fright hides in the corners. Angles packed with demons spitting filth, eyes that drool.

The world thunders after him when he threatens to leave it, so here is nothing. It is empty for me, and even no air left to breathe. No seeing or colours, as well. I plod to some tasks like a dumb beast of burden. Where does it all go? Has he swallowed it then, when he is white with hurt and rage?

And when he dies, I wonder will even the lamplighter neglect his rounds and leave us all in darkness? Perhaps I should practice now, nightly, without candles. Nothing could be plainer truth than that he will predecease me. He drives himself to it. Great hunks of time, and more often than not has he lashed himself to his work. Without fair payment for labor and beauty but, more important, without thanks from people who count.

Now I see how once more I confuse my bitterness with his. It is Catherine Blake's bitterness that galls, inks this page. No proofs required, no witnesses or evidence for the court. Even my body knows, for lately I note it wither and sag from bitterness. Dispirited body, Mr Blake might say, were I to call his attention to my loss of shapeliness and flesh.

Will counts as good what seems to join in me. That which the world believes riven becomes a chief vice, he says, the splitting of body and soul. We hear all the churchmen and parsons preach it. We see it persuading men to slaughter one another with satisfied minds. In me, it is different. Of this I am most certain. The bitterness that seizes my soul roils most painfully in my body.

I must confess I did not always admit to bitterness. At first, at the times when the world seemed to darken around Will's blanching countenance (for it was more than just his face), I counted it Will's bitterness. As long as I was silent about it, so I believed it to be. I would then withdraw in fear. My body grew cold and numb while what lay unspoken between us took on a life of its own. Nevertheless, I thought that life was rooted in Will.

When finally, after several like episodes, the molten, furious fear this thing had achieved spilled out in words, Mr Blake was not more surprised than I myself. But as I became more able to speak the thing, the words were more coherent. Together we began to pick through the debris, assign the ravaged feelings proper homes. Will's was sadness and disappointment in a world forever failing the life he inhabited. The bitterness was mine.

Having babies is what wives do. It is certain that is what is expected of wives. Issue of my loins, says the Bible. Poor Mr Blake, he has no heir they say, not always softly, to each other, some even his friends.

Heir to what I ask? In our situation we barely manage to feed ourselves and even bread is so dear in this rabid town. William says he has his students. His issue are his illuminated books, the plates I help to colour. I wonder.

Now we hear with shock of Mary Wollstonecraft's death from birthing the second daughter. Not even the writing life and all that intelligence could save her. And Godwin broken hearted. Of all the men that she took on, he is surely the kindest. And still he could not protect her in childbirth.

When I was born my mother says she was just relieved to see it was only one. She with seven birthings in ten years knew too well what wives are for, and when the man is a market gardener they can still profess children are all free labour, but the mother births and feeds them. Another beast of burden. A workhorse always delivering she was, and not only one at a time. Before me came two sets of twins that followed directly from one to the next. I am grateful for my own life, and that with Will.

So upset have I been on occasion when the rumours of my failure as a wife reached me that I have thought to tell the man. And finally did ask him, if he was wanting a natural son, to lie with some cow like Hagar in the Bible. It sounds an easy thing to write in words with letters, but saying it took daring and fluttering in my belly plus pounding heart and coursing in my ears. He roared. It was laughter and amazement, not anger from my Will. Now I should know how all my fears like that turn out baseless, for when I speak in honesty he is never angered.

That night in bed we talked some more about it, and I could tell he had been turning it in his mind for a time. His passion was not designed to make babies is what he said. He was not in the least discomfited talking about it, and it was not only to put my mind at rest that he went on for some time. He says that passion is for expression and must not be denied in any way, but it does not demand issuance in broods of children. He has passion for his work as I well observe, for all the books that he holds dear, for particular artists and sculptors long dead to the unseeing world, for his deceased brother Robert with whom he regularly enjoys privileged and fruitful communication

that fires his Imagination. My body and spirit he also admires with great passion, he says, and I should take that as a prize of love and a gift of some beauty I too can enjoy. It is like having warmed oil in the middle of winter, scented & rubbed gently into my whole self when he says that.

He never embarrasses about these things as I do, even when I think about them, but I love to turn them over in my mind. They excite me as well; just going over those things my husband has told me, has shown me, they register powerfully in my senses long after.

Is there any truth to the story that you and Mr Blake were found naked in the garden behind your house in Lambeth?

That was quite a special garden. You see, we enjoyed the anonymous privacy that London affords. And safety. This city, with its destitute children, its terrible smells and noise, still offers safe haven.

If you have never lived in a village in the English countryside, you are perhaps not familiar with how exposed a person can be. People in small Edens thrive on surveillance of any who might disrupt the well-oiled machinery. No shame for them in being a shopkeeper, especially if grandfather was the same, and a child of the generation coming on would be the same. People protecting one another in their stations, predictable behaviours, and allegiance to a bewildering set of customary deferences. All unspoken and all the stronger for that.

So we actually feel joy sharing the coal dust in the air with the multitudes going about intent on their business—whatever it might be—engaged sufficient in their individual pursuits to have no time and little interest to judge ours. One of us had the idea, and it was probably Will, that privacy afforded to our inner life, our *real* life, could be truly celebrated in this teeming city in our very own back garden. So we began in a very conscious way to have a ritual that celebrated a kind of innocence deepened through experience, as my husband would say.

What sort of ritual?

The ritual itself has to do with enhancing pleasure by flooding the senses. Just think of all the possibilities in a garden—smells, various textures on the skin, bird sounds—for we annually housed nesting birds among the viney overgrown borders of the garden. Not to speak of breezy sounds, from the airy element itself and then from tree leaves fluttering, revealing their undersides to our privileged eyes if we were attentive. On comes the visual display, parades of colors—in June the salmon poppies, musky-scented blood-red rose climbers, ink-purple iris, all light-loving explosions of plant life. But, at least for the duration of the ritual, this all seemed designed for our pleasure

alone. At the same time Will and I would become nothing more than skin-embodied elements in the sensual pageant.

Are you talking about sex and sexual play?

Most definitely yes. You see, it was our only real play together (aside from walking), as opposed to working together, which developed a very different kind of intensity. I'm not really certain at what point we made this discovery, but it began to dawn on both of us after not too many years of married life how strange it was that between us coupling had spawned no children. I who descended from a pair who reproduced like rabbits and he with several brothers and a sister.

At the same time, I had observed and learned from chance remarks of and about the many siblings how this lack of offspring seemed a failure in the eyes of the world, usually attributed to me, and evoking pity for Mr Blake. At which he howled, reasoning we scarcely had funds to keep ourselves. But it was hardly a matter of reason. We knew it to be deeper than that and certainly, as I said, a cause for some wonder. What our experience and reflection led us to was the possibility that sexual intercourse in humans might be in the cause of something other than propagation, might serve to deepen the appreciation two human beings had for one another and the world of nature.

So we began consciously to explore this possibility. Attentively, you might say, as Adam and Eve might before the judgement of bringing forth in pain and sorrow was declared the mark of being truly human—that and the onerous nature of work, which is yet another story that intrigued us both. It required deeply-held beliefs, a going against the grain of what Christian churches teach God-fearing people. But gradually even I could see how it was integral to a world we already inhabited. And it had meaning for the mythic life we had chosen.

This strikes me as a very abstract view of sexuality, Mrs Blake.

Nonsense, not at all. Cleanliness, and water, for example, those became key elements in our coupling life, became part of the ritual. These are such basic human things. I, for example, discovered how much easier to bathe the other's body then clean his clothing. That it is all the dried sweat collecting daily in our poor clothing that is so offensive to the nose. As for the way the body itself holds odours, it is a case of more pleasure to sponge it, soap it; simply rinsing will restore it to its own characteristic scent, rather than that of its residues. As for the allure of one's characteristic scent, it is doubtless an acquired taste, unknown to most people. Lying buried beneath smells of dried urine, sweat and cologne. We English are so freighted with fears of the body—fear of catching cold with nakedness, fears about which parts should be covered and which uncovered. In the

case of women's bodies, all the more fearful and distorting—which parts need to be cinched in at all cost, which plumped out but covered, which parts powdered and which perfumed, or both.

So nakedness and bathing became refreshment for our ritual. Nor were Will and I the first to discover its benefits, I'm sure, but among those most appreciative. In fact, during the time Will was doing engravings for Captain Stedman's book and he a frequent visitor to our house, we heard from him that certain coloured races of the New World bathe each day out-of-doors in streams and in sea waters of the Caribbean.

Will lately cuts both front and back of his plates because of money. He does not speak of it that way, but it is the sole reason. He does not like to speak or even think about it. Money is my worry. I tend the shop, pay the bills, buy what we eat, and so know first when we have no more.

Mr Blake is in truth a democrat, as are so many of his well-read, fine-speaking friends who meet at Mr Johnson's print shop. Perhaps he thinks I do not understand their radical ideals of equality. It is certain I do not read and discuss with skill as they do. I am not an ally to political argument or discussion. When Will tells his thoughts about American equality and other such, I know they're noble, hear his meaning. When they all gather, excite each other, talk at once, they string their words like smoke in air.

I know better. We are not born equal, nor do we prosper without consideration of birth and family, how we started, and what was given us in some degree of privilege. And thus it endures in our living. If Mr Hayley, our newest possible patron, is in need of money, he sells one house he inherited, the grander one that requires more servants for its keeping. He then reaps the unearned income to adjust and refine the smaller house he also owns. It all serves to maintain Mr Hayley in class and position never earned but by birthright. I do not speak here of monarchs, either French or English, and their tyrannical excesses, merely of a gentleman we know as patron and sometimes friend.

When Mr Stedman is short of funds, he refrains from travel to some degree, eliminates one trip to the warm West Indies, I expect. His curiosity and excitement thereby curtailed, he does not go hungry. In fact I would not slander Mr Stedman, who recently made me a present of a lovely blue milk pitcher, but I do not think I speak untruth of the man, and I know he and Will are sympathetic friends.

Mr Fuseli, perhaps more of our class because a painter. Even he, when short of funds, need only decrease his trips to the continent. We who rent our lodgings and always have, are most unequal. I think Americans, the true democrats, can afford to be so because of all that rich and unclaimed

land. I wonder was there ever a time in England when rich land for farming or housing was not belonging by right to the Crown, the nobility, or those otherwise born to wealth and property?

Will would be disappointed by such talk from me, which is why my note book is a welcome ear. Still, he lives in a world of his own making. I struggle for our survival in the world as it is given, or withheld, from me.

So often I long for some protection for Will. I never have voiced it in those terms. Some projects he has been so battered, I wondered would he recover.

People think he likes to contend, and contend he has—more so as a young man and into his middle years. Then he would contend at Joseph Johnson's with thinking people, drunk themselves with their own fervours for the rights of man, books to be planned and published, broadsides read, ideals pressed forward then misused. Rarely did I attend myself at Johnson's but Wm was so alive with it when he came home. Many such times I enjoyed it then through his body, the glow and coursing of it focused through us both.

But he never enjoyed contention. And most especially about his work. Where there is no contending for Wm is about his poetry or his visions engraved, and that is how he has been battered and often. That is what people most misunderstand. That part of his work simply *was* and *is*, like I am who am in the Old Testament, and there is no contending or doubting possible.

When Catherine was ill, her mind drifted. She made time to read. When they had just moved to Felpham and Will's sister Catherine was upon them was one such time. Kate recognized just how ill and exhausted she was as she was unpacking yet another carton of books. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Short Residence in Sweden* she held in her hand as she succumbed. She could do no more and took the book to bed with her.

To the surprise of all three of them, Will and his sister Catherine carried the household, with sympathy left over for the Catherine in bed. Some portion of her husband still unknown to Catherine functioned with his sister as if there was understanding between them. Tea had always been Will's morning offering to Kate, but now other domestic tasks proliferated between sister and brother—buying food, fixing and serving it, organizing the work space. A whole series of days was punctuated this way for them, while Catherine lay in bed drifting and hurting. All the while she kept reading the book produced from Wollstonecraft's Scandinavian journey. It truly enchanted Kate, gave her the character posthumously she had so long feared and denied.

Each morning, for seven days, I have awakened before light to a bird recital. He is a solo singer. By the time the sky begins to lighten, a whole chorus joins, but for the first part he is alone. Probably he is the same as the one we have heard at the other end of the day, when it is already dark, we are in bed, and the rest of nature sleeping.

That I can be wakened by such a small sweet piping is due to the quietness we newly live in. Also having had the luxury of being still and in bed with ailments. Catherine stays on and is at least another pair of hands. Wm worries some and hovers, but good in his concern that I recover to health. (He has written a necessary letter for me to Mrs Flaxman that I simply dictated in the bare bones, then he elaborated. Strangely he has always been so adept with dutiful letters that leave me quite dull and speechless.) What I suffer from is surely simple exhaustion—and not so simple dislocation, for we have transported ourselves to quite a different world than I have ever known.

The matter of sound is a good example. Little did I know how filled with noise we lived in London in the several different houses we had. Street noises were everywhere, the buying and selling sounds, late night carousing, carriages that rattle and heave, sounds of labour, all of this filled our ears and I didn't even know it until we removed to living by the sea at Felpham. Will had visited Mr Hayley before and learned the quality of the place, but for me it is real dislocation, and my ears are amazed. As a child I had animals, eight brothers and sisters before me, bedrooms and beds shared and filled, never privacy let alone quiet solitude. Now my ears listen instead of shutting out sound.

Here on the upper floor with window face to the sea, it was at first so quiet and exposed to wide sky, clouds, and sea, it felt as though the air itself was listening to me breathe. Every slight change of light is recorded on both sky and sea. Colours shift a bit, even from one minute to the next, then sometimes more dramatically, and all these changes seem to take me with them, bright and joyous with freshest sea breeze, dark and still all air withheld, and one or two sudden storms that threaten to pull us bodily out of our cottage.

Authors write of being swallowed by the sea, but my fancy in these storms is different. In each case the fury comes out from the sea, and the fear is that we would be swept into one of these strangely quiet villages hereabouts where everyone seems familiar with everyone else, except me.

Mrs Blake, it must come as no surprise to you that, over the years, many people have questioned your husband's sanity. I imagine he wasn't easy to live with.

I can only guess how tiresome it would be to be married to "an easy person." If you mean Mr Blake demanded more of me than I ever thought possible, yes. But as I told you earlier, at the time

I chose my husband, I knew nothing, either of him or of me. His eyes were unlike any that had ever held mine, and I could only wonder what mystery lay behind them. Which mystery continued, never left us. It is certainly hard work loving a mystery. You cannot reason about it. You can never directly know it, but once it draws you, nothing else would be worthwhile.

I recognize such chaos. How can we know anything about the "mystery," as you call it?

By good fortune, there are signs. In the case of Mr Blake and myself, there was from the first a connection through the hands that was telling. Simply putting a hand on his or on any part of his body—it could be his arm or leg, his wrist or ankle—produced heat, a kind of palpable, buzzing heat at the site of the connection. Then there was also from the first the calling draw of the eyes that I mentioned earlier. It was intent and demanding, at the same time deeply promising and yielding. If you listened as you looked, you would hear a relentless, circular wind blowing towards you, quite terrifying, except that as it came, it was unexpectedly warm and moist with a sweet spicy odour. Those are the signs, rather physical I suppose, that proved reliable over time and even when other things seemed too difficult or frightening.

What kinds of things frightened you, Catherine—may I call you by your first name?

Yes, by all means, Catherine. It is my proper name, as it was his mother's and his sister's. As to those things that frightened me, I would say that Catherine and fear have an entire history together.

Is there a beginning to the history?

A memorable beginning. You see, fear was one of the first things that appeared as I became a thinking, reflecting person. Once I had met William, the process began. I discovered, with some surprise, I was filled with fears. First the powerful fear, then shame at it, but the strongest feeling was fear. You could read it all through my body as I tried to subdue its expression in my face. Even reading occasioned fear, since William determined from the beginning I would read and write.

Will comes in flushed and wild-eyed. Says he has seen fairies dancing in our yard. He describes the whole scene, and I am enchanted. Also a bit fearful, for inevitably the ecstatic periods lead to his being careless in the world outside. Even in such a small place as Felpham, which seems so gentle, there are people who could misunderstand sufficient to bring us trouble.

Now he will be feverish for days, and wondrous images will be wrought in his plates. All in reverse of how I would think it, write it, sketch it on a paper, and it still amazes me that he is so able to visualize in reverse. With Will teaching me to draw, I thought it would come clearer what it is for him to cut a plate and produce his relief texts. But what I learned to do is from another world than

Will's. I draw from a flesh and blood image, taking in little details by observing again and again, back and forth from my eye to my hand. I look, then draw and go back to check, then change slightly, and so on.

With Will it is entirely different. What he draws comes from a place we can't see until he draws it, makes it physically alive to our eyes. It is also more liquid and flowing as he does it, when I watch him, as if it is in a watery form inside his mind which then simply pours through his pencil, brush, or even his graver for that matter.

When we have talked about these things, he has sometimes told me about his periods studying the sculptures of classical forms at the museum. Years of careful learning to fit the limbs together, set down the fine sets of muscles together, as they fit and are capable of powerful movements, even at rest seeming to move. All as if sculpted, for even then, when still a boy, Will had the sculpting eye that makes his plates so rich. Not that he knew from the beginning he would do the engraving apprenticeship. That was not in his mind. Just all those forms moving in beauty while cast in stone.

I am more and more alone as Mr Blake tends Mr Hayley's work. I picture my Will, legs dangling, astride a small plump pony, Bruno by name. Mr Blake and Bruno plod dutifully behind Mr Hayley, finely seated with open umbrella on his high horse whose name I forget, only that the horse is his own and Mr Blake's poor beast on loan from a Miss Harriet Poole. All for the purpose of both breakfasting with that same lady. Or so it looks to me, left to tend the good press that more and more often now turns out engravings not even of Will's design and of little interest to the man I know.

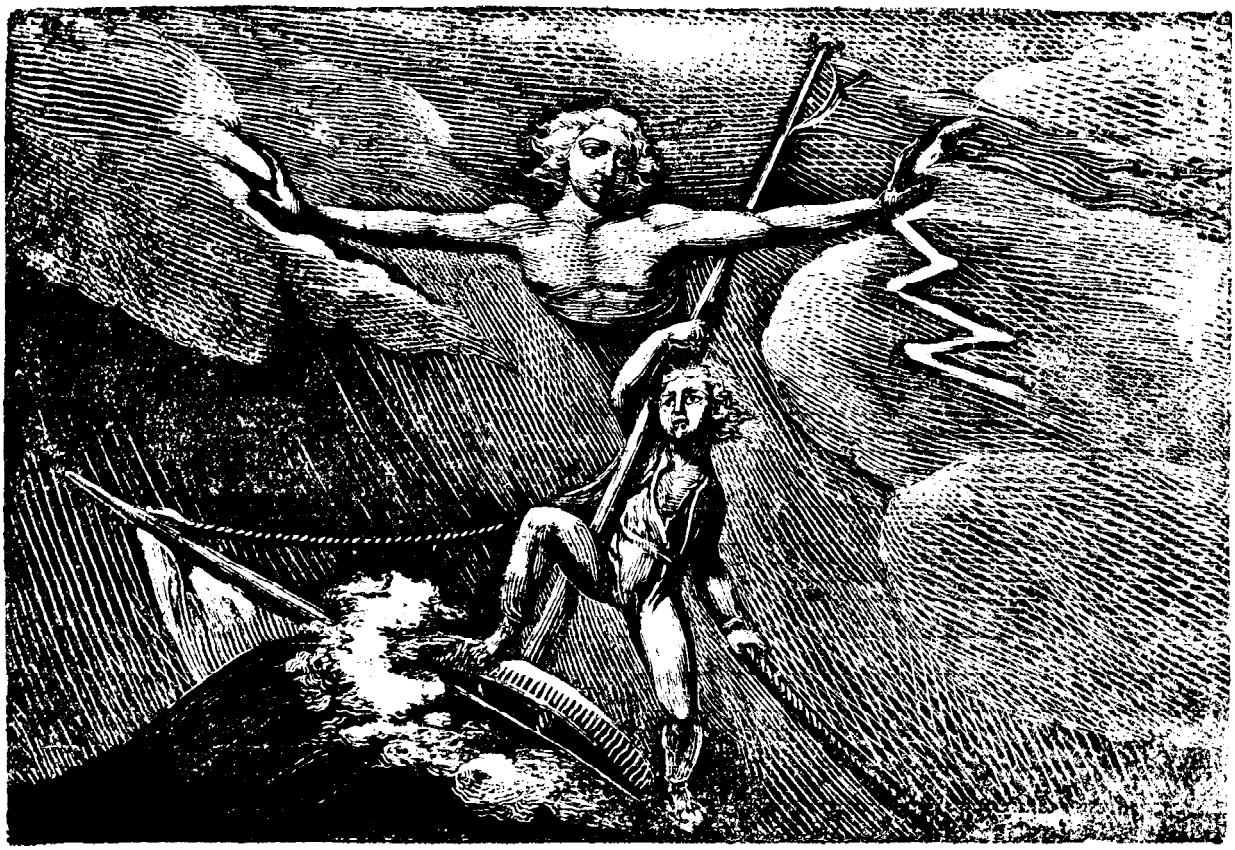
Irritable tone that I have, add that I am chilled in this house by the wet sea. Spring, our very first away from London and myself filled with pleasant hopes, but spring here seems much delayed. The dampness is sharp to my very inside bones and all here exaggerated: the cold colder, the brightness brighter, the rainy grey gloom gloomier. I am so much more exposed than my Will, who can live happily in his head when the elements are unkind.

When we began here, all was such promise, for even the first winter was delayed and fall lingered long, even into the first of the winter holidays. The autumn light on the water enchanted me and the warm sun baked our south-facing cottage.

Almost immediately, as soon as I was recovered from the exhaustion of removing from London, we had a commission to benefit the orphans. We accomplished it quickly on a pewter plate that Mr Hayley supplied for the project, for "Little Tom the Sailor" was his poem. Some maudlin and cloying I thought of the text. Will agrees. Though for him I am sure the words "God the Protector of All" are the most troublesome. It was all in a good cause and a bit of income for us as

well. Will's sister Catherine still with us most of the time makes three to feed. Did I say Hayley arranged for the work? More important, the two engravings are Will's own design. And beautiful, though one so different from the other. Never do his engravings fail to work a mystery for me from plate to paper. Design's surroundings bitten in, the reversal obscuring the picture to my eyes, then the inking so rash somehow, as if to smear what remains of the sketch first seen. At last comes the moment to peel paper from plate and it is all there in its minute particulars, curving sweeps all making perfect sense together. And looking no doubt a perfect match to the picture Mr Blake's mind carried from the first and throughout the whole.

Of the two engravings Will did for "Little Tom," I like better the one that follows under the poem, for its tree. Something about the way the tree and the widow woman bend to each other. Plus the very curved path leading away. I think the young boy a little odd now. It did not occur to me at the time, but I think him more a miniature man, and in some strange finery at that. An early proof is affixed. Better and braver the boy in the picture at the head of the broadside, I see that now. All the turbulence of weather in Will's lines makes fine drama. The artist himself favours the flying figure of course, the one who hovers over the lad, for in him Will corrects that tired God Protector of all!



Sometimes there is a longing for a woman friend. Her particulars remain unknown to me at present. Occasionally when Will is reading aloud from one of the new novels, a female character presents a certain appeal. For a few days I will round her out, develop her in a way her author did not turn, and see her for a possible friend.

It never lasts. We are on to another story that has another cast. Besides, my concentration for that kind of developing is just not strong enough. I am like children who try to mark a path in a strange forest and explore at the same time. Soon a loud owl will hoot from a tree and they will listen, and then look. Or follow the bird itself with some urgency. Or one will then trip, stumble over twisted roots; another grow hungry so they must seek berries or other wild food just to sustain their bodies. Marking the trail is forgotten and soon they are lost. Unless they walk only the same path they have always walked and abandon the urge to explore.

In novels sisters are often drawn, but only to make a point. For instance the good sister and the bad one; the one who is pretty and the one who is ugly. Jealousy is an important feeling between these women, which is scarcely anything we need more of. My own life with sisters would seem to be lost. In fact my whole family behind me is of the same loss. In stories and novels there may be

long time-gaps, but eventually reunions happen which are noisy, full of feelings and eruptions boldly revealed for a scene. It may be that way in families of the upper classes where houses are large, food is plentiful and servants serve, and no one must scratch for a living.

As a child, the scratching and serving were the life itself. If any energy was left over from that, it went not toward reunion plans but to dreams of escape. Another life, a different way, no matter I had no idea what it should be. At that time it didn't occur to me to talk about it to a sister or befriend a girl to share the undrawn dream. Nor was there time for any of that. It now seems possible that scratching and serving hold a certain comfort, a habitual quality that might in time approximate a poor man or woman's idea of tradition.

The parting from my family was never tearful, as partings are so often shown in books. The rare times I have returned, it was more as a stranger, and never what I would call a visit between people who ever knew one another. Their lives seem ever the same, punctuated regularly by illness, death, a marriage, a holiday with a bit more food for the table one year than another, weather more or less favorable to the crops they garden for market.

My life with Will unthinkable, inexplicable.

Not that I speak of wanting a woman friend to Mr Blake. I know he entrusts me with his dear body, his feelings and dreams. I am honored confidante. His political thoughts and governmental ideas he has shared more with his friends at Mr Johnson's, and for the rest his mind teems with live presences most of the time, I believe.

That is not to say that the loss of his brother Robert is in any way reparable. Yet he was more as a son than a brother, and Will reports his presence grows only stronger with time.

Mr Hayley hounds me. Says it is for both our good he speak to me in private regarding Will. He is sweet syrup, slippery butter.

It is not the first time this has happened. Better perhaps to feel hounded than numb with confusion as I did following his first assault. For now I know assault it is, wrapped around in smooth words, soft eyes, the concern of a fond uncle. You and I, we share this secret understanding, he seems to say. I would not dare approach your husband with these words, he is too quick to take offence. Tends to be irritable when approached about such practicalities, don't you agree, says he. Not that he expects an answer, only that I listen like a dumb sponge to all his concern for our well-being and future.

H says he worries Mr Blake will not continue to find work among H's friends if he insists on indulging his own fancies. I think that is how he put it. Could that possibly be how he really thinks

of it? He adds it is not only himself who notes a problem on this point; now he must defend my husband to others who have even stronger objections.

Are they not satisfied? Do we not complete the assignments? I manage to break into his stream of words. We work hard, I protest, knowing he pries at something quite other than hard work. I will not yield in his game.

He sputters, then dear lady this, and best wife & helpmeet that; my hope is I have thrown him off his mark, made him lose the scent. But no, he returns again. Now he will really enlist my aid, says he, being reminded by myself how closely Will and I work together, how I am involved in each project. And how dearly my husband loves me, he adds for good measure.

And so finally we come to the crux: Mr Blake does not always produce exactly what his client has asked for. He follows his own imaginings, even when the style and manner of an image has been clearly spelled out and agreed upon. I could coach him, or coax him or some such, at his work, for after so many years of assisting him I can surely tell when Mr Blake's own fancies begin to take over a project.

Will I not at least consider it, he asks with a flourish as he leaves. Inside me I am shaking and seething. It is quite hopeless I know. Whether Mr Hayley *can* not or *will* not see Will's true genius, we may never know. He wants to put Will in his service, as a vassal of medieval times, and that will not happen.

H likes it that we live in attendance in this cottage, nearly an appendage to his own grand house, The Turret. He enjoys providing wealthy friends who need the odd engraving or emblem. He would be circus master and we the trained dogs, then he would see we are sleek and well fed and groomed.

Felpham, 1802

To My Friend in Imagination,

My husband advises me that if I am longing for a woman friend I should find her best in my Imagination. I trust him because he is poet and artist and, more important, lives regularly in his Imagination. Everything he paints, even figures of men and women who move as if they were alive, come from his Imagination. He loves nakedness, and it may be that he has learned a lot about a woman's body from watching me and loving me, but the truth is that when he begins to draw or paint, there would be nothing visible to a watcher but my husband and his artist's tools.

His name is William, he signs it Wm, and I usually call him Will, but I will stop telling about him now, because I myself need the friend. I feel strange pursuing you this way when I don't know

you at all, but W says I will in time. My hope is you will reveal yourself, even answer me, for there are questions in me. I have for some time kept small note books with jottings. It was first for practice, because I came to marriage without an education. Again, this was something my husband urged and it certainly helped. I still write, and it can be necessary in a different way, when I feel I will explode with worry or good or bad feelings.

But I can't ask questions and hope for answers in a note book. I hope to write to you from time to time and keep you in mind as a presence, especially when I am alone. When W and I married, I moved away from my family, and little contact continued. Not that I would want it otherwise. You can't imagine how different my life has become, and I'm sure they would never understand if I tried to explain. I would rather speak with a friend who is capable of true understanding and might also have things to tell me.

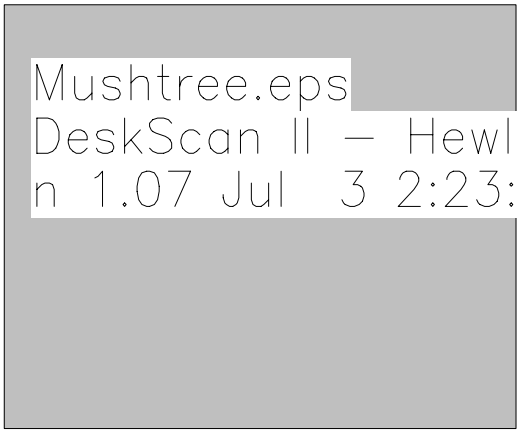
I hope to know what you look and sound like. I will keep you in mind and heart and try to have the door to my Imagination open at all times, or as often as possible.

Catherine Blake

A good week for us. Someone recommended by Mr H has bought a copy of *Songs of Innocence*. Wm is pleased and now we are printing two more copies to replenish the dwindled stock. Spirits lift from executing everybody else's wishes. We are all happily employed, Mr & Mrs Blake and the busy wooden press.

The plates travelled the journey from London well and ink nicely. Colouring is not so easy here. I had forgotten how much in miniature this book is. Light in the workroom is dim from the shade of the roof overhang, and I may need to fix an upstairs room for the purpose. This became especially clear to me while stabbing, stitching, and binding in covers. Sewing and mending clothing is one thing; binding a book, quite another.

Wm has taken to singing each song as we work on it. A joy to hear him this way. It reminds me he is by nature cheerful & of music. I expected a life by the sea would increase that, but it has not. They are incorrect who think he broods. It is not his wont.



Although they may be hardest to colour, I love the twisting swirls that start with the Title-page and Introduction. My favourite trees and vines, I always think when we do this book, they seem to grow from every

page. All except the "Echoing Green" tree. Wm made a solid massive oak, but it puts me in mind of a giant mushroom. Once when we walked to do errands in Chichester after a rainy spell, we came upon just such a mushroom. It was shaped exactly like his oak. Even the proportions were alike, tho its cap hardly green. I made Wm stop while I stretched out on the grass under it to see were his figures seated there too. I think we sang the song together nearly all the rest of the way into the city.

My other favourites here are the two designs for "The Little Black Boy." Not just the trees, but all seems to move from sunrise to evening in the same one song. Arching trees protect us. The first arches left to right and bushy topped, the dark not yet lit by a just-rising sun. The second has travelled with the sun across the page and arches right to left, more a wispy willow. All there seems golden evening to me, and gentleness. I know Wm sometimes means a halo for the Christ, but it seems the moon to me. The moon that turns all to burnished gold and streaks the stream as well.

Perhaps Will is disappointed not to do *Songs of Experience* also. There is less call for it, and I am glad not to be doing it now: seems we live it here too much of the time.

I had planned to be better than this as the trial approached. Instead I am sick and whipped like a mongrel dog. Yet the trial itself is still several months hence. The charges Mr Scofield brings are untrue fabrications, yet he has recorded them in words for all to see. I could not believe a Justice of the Peace could credit such words, reeking with falsehoods as I know them to be. But a certain Justice of the Peace at Chichester sent the first warrant to us on 15 August, my poor Will to appear in court very next morning.

Assault and seditious words are what the soldier accuses, but in such particularity as to compose a scene that never was, now made perfectly visible and audible by his lies. Will goes next morning per command, fearless as ever and thirsty for truth and justice. I myself still stalwart, though in truth perhaps more in disbelief and shock than courage. The charges appall us sufficient on paper, I fear they are to be repeated aloud in court. Instead the Justices talk of bail, sums impossible for us to meet, and my very guts melt and course through my whole being like fire.

Mr Blake is ordered to appear in the same court after Michaelmass at Quarter Sessions. Securities are required calling for money from God knows where. It all moved so very fast from that point. Suddenly Mr Hayley comes forward with part of the money for bail, his printer Mr Seagrave (of Chichester) with the rest, and my Will is a free man, for now.

I smart at Mr Hayley's kindness, for he and Will have not agreed of late on subjects of greatest import to my Will, such as the poems and paintings. They were much stretched between them. Besides, it was Mr Hayley's gardener in our garden when the whole incident occurred 12 August. It

will have to be the same person bearing true testimony on our behalf, for he is the only other besides ourselves to witness the actual incident from first to last.

For Mr Hayley's loyal kindness in coming forward himself so quickly and urging his printer to same, we are forever grateful. The more so in light of the differences that had come about, as I said. Upon returning home to Felpham, Will himself mentions some remorse at having underestimated Mr Hayley.

Next morning Will is energetic and hopeful, writes a long letter to Mr Butts in London with seven drawings he has now completed. Yet for me, everything here is now all poison. Simply to catch sight of our garden is to be struck and bruised anew. The Garden of Evil, I think to myself, for it is where all this falsehood began. Of Will, Scofield charges that he d__d the King of England, his country and subjects. That his soldiers were all bound for slaves. Of myself, Scofield has me saying I would fight for Bonaparte against England if he came. But no matter about me, it is my Will Mr Scofield is after. That is too clear, and he will fabricate anything for revenge.

He claims Will assaulted his person, first in our garden where they met, twice more in the road, where Mr Blake it is said pursued Scofield after driving him physically from our garden. And if such lies are charged and read, then will they not persuade? Will makes a list of neighbours who witnessed pieces of the actual event. Only William, the gardener and hostler at Fox Inn, saw it all. Mr Blake thinks he will give honest testimony for us. I am not as certain of it, tho I promise myself not to trouble Will with my uncertainties. He must do well in court, and I fear how his tongue is sometimes misunderstood. His words are often too honest and abrupt when he expresses his opinions. A soldier would never be his chosen companion. Nor would he be welcome in our own garden.

Returning to London was in no way a homecoming. I grew immediately ill and went to bed in what was now the house of my brother-in-law, James Blake. But it was the same house where Will had started out. Also the one into which I came a stranger as Will's bride. Where Will's father could never hide his disappointment. Nor reveal what his hopes for Will's spouse really were.

We had decided not to rent a place of our own until after the trial. I wondered whether I would then be living alone. There seemed a good chance Will would be imprisoned and no way to guess for how long. These were perilous times. We had all been stunned by the chaos and terror that erupted in Paris. Somehow the American colonists had managed and the Parisians had not, but viciously turned upon one another. Hundreds of years of servitude and bitterness developed a taste for blood. People we know—the American Imlay and the adventurous Mary Wollstonecraft—barely escaped the wholesale killing there. Tom Paine was valuable to them, but for how long?

Factions had shifted from week to week. I was glad that Will and I were at home in England, where plenty resented the monarchy but King George had his head, and most of the people were alive. By comparison it even felt secure for a time, though within a decade, by the turn of the century, Napoleon had taken over, come to power, and we feared invasion by the French at any time.

I see now what terrible times these were, and, as we went through them, our own fears loomed larger to me. They filled my thoughts, and I was thoroughly sick and exhausted by the time we had removed our selves and belongings from the cottage at Felpham.

James Blake's house was dreary. I had grown used to the sight of art on the walls, good engravings of themes from classical times, good prints. The sculpture from the Renaissance master Michel Angelo and the painter Raphael whom Will so admired. The walls were bare in the Blake house. My sickroom was dark. Only one window admitted light and not even the sun, just light. Two walls adjoined next door buildings and the fourth wall faced a dark court, with an overhang. In contrast with Felpham it was stifling. Openness of the sea, stretch of the garden, sense of light all around and especially sparkling off the surface of the sea. Here in London was the coal dust, the concentrated fumes from lamp oil, the walls of the room enclosing me. I felt entombed.

Weeks and months rolled on to winter, to the time appointed for Will to stand trial in Chichester, and I was still sick. Will had by this time hung art works on the walls of the room we called ours, but I couldn't even see them.

Such a grey pall comes between us since all began in the garden at Felpham. But unseen by Will, or so he claims, and he thinks simply that I am exhausted by our move, and so he tells friends in correspondence. In truth the greyness sits between me and all the world. It is just that so much of my world is Mr Blake, when he is greyed dim, it seems like all.

Nor is it honestly wrong what Mr Blake has said about my being made sick and exhausted by the move. My body aches and refuses its work and my mind will move only in circles. There have been so many moves it seems, each so hopeful in looking forward but dismal at the end. Poland Street to Lambeth, then to Felpham, now back to London barely three years after. Each time it feels as though the transport is more difficult, though I cannot believe we have actually acquired more belongings. Always now there is the rolling press whose weight and bulk demand assistance. Of course it is our greatest necessity, but a great impediment to an inexpensive going from place to place. Every available blanket and bed linen is needed for wrapping plates and tools to guard against their breaking or scraping up against one another on the journey. The carriages available to ourselves for our movings have been unmerciful—without springs and the roadways always filled with ruts for jouncing.

Hard to believe, just three years since we imagined Mr Hayley to be the well-off patron with good taste that we always hoped for. Now after so many disappointments that show him to be otherwise, and insensitive to the original beauty of Will's creations, we find ourselves in debt to him. Without his aid at the end of our stay in Felpham, I doubt Will would be a free man. I wonder at the fretting and fearing I did in the years just before Felpham, so sure that in London free minds like my Will's could so easily be nabbed by some military hungry to defend the King. In the end it was a soldier in a garden by the sea zealous to do us in, resenting Will's democratic spirit. By comparison London feels the safer place, though grey, dirtier and noisier even than I remember it to be. Could it be that strong fear and disappointment uncolour the world?

I'm glad to see you alive," I said to Mr Blake after the trial, "just glad to see you alive."

Mr Blake, all surprise, says "But Kate, you are always present to me, and so you were there, all the time listening and knowing my person never in mortal danger."

Still, feeling his warm arm against mine, thinking now to myself not out loud, "I'm just glad to see you alive."

Later while cooking and doing the ordinary evening chores, newly blessed again, I thinking all the while Why? for Will has taught me to think under the looming things that first come to mind. Why all the fear for his life? for our life? Thoughts come quickly then, more pictorial truly than thought, marching soldiers with guns, shouting, angry London mobs threatening the quiet in our work together; excited talk at tables, drinking and dispute always louder, the quick slaughter of animals for market as a girl growing up, quick struggle with horrible squeals and groans and blood everywhere.

Now I've dropped the pot splattering. Will surrounds me; warms arms, I smell his good neck. The pictures erase and I rest in our life.

She began waking halfway through the night. Worries, she supposed, too much on her mind. Then it got to be a habit, waking at about three; crawling out of bed so as not to wake her husband who slept far too little anyway, throwing a shawl around her shoulders. Building up the fire, even slightly, made pops and cracks; that and the slight change of light would wake him without fail. Better to coax the cat that trailed after her to snuggle as muff for her feet or legs, whichever pleased his independent, comfort-loving soul.

There had been times, at the very beginning of their marriage, when sleep seemed impossible altogether. Something about the shared bed, the other body so ardent and demanding, even when

sleeping. Not enough room on the bed (though she had never experienced sleeping alone, it was different with sisters) at times, or not enough air to breathe. That was more to the point. The way William breathed, all available air rushed in and out as in a giant bellows. Not that it made noise. It just happened, went on all the time, but much more obvious when she went to bed with him.

Finally she told him. She had to; he was puzzled, she feared angry, at her pulling away from nighttime embraces for lack of air, failed to hide her sleeplessness and subsequent thrashing. "Just can't breathe," she gasped. Then he knew. Suggested she take the air, outside walks for an hour or two, even for errands, to catch some air and vacation from his presence. She trusted him then, understanding her so. Her body unwound, filled with air, and she began to sleep. And to dream unusual dreams, but that was another story.

This is about a new pattern of sleeplessness that began when they had returned from Felpham, the trial was over, and London was home once again.

You perhaps wonder at the unquestioning loyalty between these two, loyalty maintained under threat of poverty, of legal accusation, and of indifference to their work. It was hard won, at least on her part, and, since this is Catherine's story, things like this can only be known according to the knower.

The early incidents usually began first thing in the morning when he brought her tea. His face looked so different, and even more so as the day went on. The furrows that ploughed vertically between his heavy brows were normal, along with a tendency for his full lips to protrude further as his Imagination simmered. The difference that distressed her was in the eyes. And there, it wasn't the intensity, nearly always present, which had strongly attracted her from the first. This morning the intensity had an overlay of indifference that specifically excluded her. A coldness. He seemed a stranger, a strange man, perhaps not altogether kind, whose intentions were to mould her to his will, to try to change her into a woman more to his liking. More attuned to his special desires. He threatened her: a hint of violence lurked.

She questioned him, fearful yet eager to find out what lay behind this shift that was visible and now increasingly palpable too. She asked about a recent meeting with the crowd of republicans regularly gathered at Joseph Johnson's, what each person said there. William was clearly annoyed at her interrogations—first his indifference was interrupted, later times his work as well. Several times he professed not to hear the question. "What's that? Hmm? Speak up, Kate for the love of God. How am I to hear if you only mumble and whisper?"

Her certitude only increased that she was on the way to discovery. Only if she could find the right question would the frightening shift in his character be explained, revealed for what it really

was. She persisted, even through dinner, which she prepared with heavy heart and hands. He, now fully apprised that something had placed him squarely under attack, had lost his appetite. He ate scarcely anything, a rebuke to her cooking, usually pleasing to them both.

Cleaning their few dishes, Catherine stopped probing for the information she no longer wanted, now only feared. She questioned no more the nature of his relationship with Mary Wollstonecraft, no more about the possibility that William's first intended had refused him only after he had struck her in rage. But the thoughts were there, and growing.

Will cut through her preoccupied silence and desultory rearranging of cutlery and plates."Kate, I don't think you should be colouring prints until your mood improves, until you're feeling better. I have no idea what it is. It's one thing to take out your anger on me, that's bad enough, and I don't deserve it, but at least don't spoil all the work we've so far done with this printing."

That was the moment of confirmation for Catherine. She scattered the forks in her hand, and flashed her black eyes in his direction. She spun around, grabbed her bonnet from its hook, and sailed purposefully out the front door. She walked, at first very quickly, losing herself easily among the noisy hordes crowded along the street. Clearly he was dissatisfied with her appearance and abilities, to say nothing of her ever-wanting intelligence. He had put up with her long enough and was losing patience, that was obvious. And had she not been quick enough to get out of his way, no telling what he would have done. Like as not he would have struck her, and he was strong, especially his hands and arms were unusually strong.

She continued to walk, even stride, and to stride without seeing. What a relief, not to see anything, not to have to look so carefully at things—all those art works he was always telling her about and showing her, all the subtle differences in colouring he expected her to observe, not to speak of those warning changes in his own appearance she had lately come to observe. It was more than she could bear, and by this time she was crying as she walked. It was good to wail and make noise, push the air through her lungs, while all around her the throng made their own noises—chattering, yelling and hawking, taunting their own mewling offspring, teasing animals—whatever it was that preoccupied them fully and made her invisible.

With the changing light she finally began to tire. But not before thinking further thoughts about Will. Now that she was gone, and invisible at that, would he miss her at all and feel some regret? More likely would he exult in his freedom to pursue some woman of perfection or a creature more malleable whom he could mould to his every desire. Such taunts expanded in her invisible, deaf and dumb body until she lay down in a soft patch of grasses and fell heavily asleep, baked in the hot, late afternoon sun.

When she awoke, it was dark. Not cold, because it was summer, but very dark. She felt as though she had drunk far too much ale, or even gin, and was now suffering the inevitable senseless aftermath. She looked around and saw that she must have walked miles and miles from their house, nearly into the suburbs of the City, and it would be a long walk back. She retrieved the bonnet from where it had covered her face as she lay, and began walking slowly back into the City.

She wondered that she hadn't been taken for dead by some stranger passing by, but perhaps they thought she *had* actually passed out from drunkenness, which is how she still felt, after all. And then she recalled her invisibility and the preoccupied indifference of the noisy throng that accompanied her walk. She wondered then, for the first time, at her vulnerability to those strangers, at her safety which had not crossed her mind at the time. As her head gradually cleared and the street lamps of the City brightened her way, she wondered at the desperation she had felt. It was a wild force that had coursed through her whole being, though strangely cross-cutting her mind. Whatever was thinking her thoughts for all those walking hours certainly didn't seem to have been the mind she was accustomed to thinking with. It was wild and ferocious. She wondered at it, as she might at a curious stranger, newly introduced.

Coming slowly through the door, Catherine saw Will in the light of the oil lamp, saw him rise eagerly from his reading chair and turn to meet her with his arms already circling in anticipation. He covered her with soft kisses, then sat her in the chair and brought her refreshment before saying a word. Then he seated himself on the floor, removed her scuffed shoes, caressed her weary feet, and asked softly, "Kate, where were you? I worried so. I looked all through the neighbourhood, went into all our local pubs and nearby stores, asked dozens of people about you, some of them total strangers. I just couldn't find you, nor could I imagine where you might have gone. I was so worried!"

"Oh, Will, I had the scariest dream!" said Catherine. It was true. She had had a scary dream, and not just once but several times. Once while asleep on the side of the road she just recalled, and it was just like one she had had during the night, before she woke to find Will looking subtly altered in the first place. In fact there had been quite a number of these dreams lately. Odd that they all began to come back to her only now, in light of the one she just now recalled, or in light of the frenzied state and walk, in light of the awful incident with Will.

Remembering the dreams was nowhere near as easy as remembering the feelings they produced in her, but she set her mind to trying to retrieve what she could. Will encouraged her to leave her shoes off, stretch out on their bed, and try to imagine herself back into one of the dreams. First, all she got were feelings of fear and loss. There she was in the dream, big as life, intent on purchasing

food from a man at market, but—as he is weighing something and the people milling around—all around has grown ominously silent; she feels her purse has gone missing. She checks around her, looks the way she has just walked, checks in her pockets.

There is no doubt now it is missing. For some reason she feels too ashamed to admit her loss to the seller. She turns and walks some distance, then stops at another booth and picks out some produce she wishes to buy. Someone (the farmer?) weighs them for her, smiles, and extends his hand. Whereupon the feeling of panic permeates Catherine once again as she feels for her purse. Again, she discovers it missing and is fearful and ashamed as the seller this time asks who she thinks she is, preparing to buy things she has no means for. Why go through with having them weighed?

But she has gone from there in no time, reappearing on the edge of the market scene, where she confesses to a sympathetic-looking woman her loss.

"Why, Kate? How much money were you actually carrying?"

"Not much," admits the dream-Catherine, "but I had it. I always carry it and there is all my identification I don't have. No one knows me now."

"What identification did you have?"

"Well, a letter addressed to me, to my own name, for one thing."

"Which name you surely know, my girl, without the letter."

"But it's not only my name; my address is also on the letter as well."

And just as mysteriously the scene shifts to Catherine wandering helplessly through neighbourhood after neighbourhood, looking in vain for her house. In fact, try as hard as she can, she can't quite picture her house, and how can she find a house if she can't even tell what it looks like?

"Then there's the key," thinks the same dream-Catherine. "The key is also in the purse that I've lost or can't find: Were I to remember anything about the house—where it is or what it looks like—I couldn't get in without the key."

"Oh, Will," says Catherine now, "they were all like that in one way or another, those dreams. I lost things, couldn't find my way, had lost my identification, my keys, my purse, my house, my way home. It was scary and awful."

Will, in the meantime notes with what colorful detail she is able to retrieve these dreams from her Imagination. He tells her that, whereupon she elaborates in even more detail—the strangeness of her surroundings, why she felt so threatened and lost, the unfamiliarity of the people she spoke with.

"Look Kate, my dearest one," says Will. "Look how powerful an Imagination you have. It takes you to the neighbourhood of dreams, via a strange, unknown way, but the very next closest neigh-

bourhood is that of visions. And, yes, you felt a stranger approaching it, and certainly you don't yet trust it. But you needn't be afraid. You don't need to prove some old identity. You have everything you need and have only to turn the corner."

"But I felt so lost."

"Was there nothing of beauty there for you to see?"

"Well, yes, there were some beautiful things, but they are so elusive and subtle, they disappear in a moment. They have no substance."

"I doubt that. You're not dreaming now. Continue to leave your eyes open, now. Can't you still see those things?"

"Yes, I guess I can if I don't push at them. But I can't put my hands out and touch them."

"Put out your hand then. Your may not be able to touch them, but they are nevertheless real. Go ahead, put your hand right through them and see what happens."

"They're still there if I allow them."

Looking back at it, years later, Felpham back to London took the shape of a contraction. As if one were headed out to sea via a rounded, promising harbor. She smelled the sea air and the promise of delicate horizons where sea and sky exchanged their colors. He could see his ever-changing universe transferred to the walls of the world. Their whole bodies expanded, not with fat or food, but with promise. She felt new spaces between her ribs expanding like the bellows of a musical instrument. Crying out for joy, she turned and threw her arms wide in a country dance.

And found herself a small heap on the hard floor. An aching ball of flesh fallen out of a beckoning dream. That is the essence of it, and if I were to illustrate such a reversal you would first see me inscribe in soft pastel the entire circle of the horizon where normally we glimpse only a curve. Picture it cerulean lightened with streaks of sun-gold. Abruptly then, force, squeeze, both eyes to contract. Focus on one hard, pencilled dot placed somewhere on a grey page.

The drama of such an illustration is borne out by the actual growth of our lives. For Will, from the beginning, the taking in of any beauty that met his eye. Collecting only the very finest of what the truly great artists saw and gave for the growth of the world. Hours and hours of study in ancient damp buildings, for the sake of absorbing through eyes and hands some three-dimensional form made human in stone. Then followed the apprenticeship, all those many years, twelve and thirteen hours each day of service, all but one or two days of each year, so that all he had so far absorbed of beauty could be rendered again in graved lines so perfect as to produce fine shadows cast by towering trees under rolling clouds.

And I myself, Catherine Blake, always growing from my own small beginnings. More like a blind plant, as I've mentioned, at first, but surely expanding in size and understanding. And once our lives were joined, awakening to the third thing that joined us two. Will's trust in me was from the beginning. Each part he gave me in our work was of trust—that I could see colours right for the forms, that my eye could recognize different stages of the pulls, and that I had strength and steadiness for the press. This third thing that grew up between us was like any created being. What it grew on was freedom and encouragement, some economic support. Recognition would come, not in the sense of an actor's applause, but in the sense of being seen as real, a live addition to the world of beauty we served.

A strange Sunday indeed. London too dirty in such heat to be bearable. Walking streets with emptied slops and food remains makes it insulting to be out of doors in the city. Recall the sea smell of Felpham, with grateful nose. We two are quartered more closely here, and when William is all in his Paradise (or in his Jerusalem as now fills him) it is all the more lonely and painful to be somewhere separated from his joy.

Large ear trumpets magnify the sound for those with hearing impaired. So too spectacles and magnifiers come to the aid of those otherwise cut off from sights that surround them. I think often, and mostly at times like these, of how I might gain entrance to Will's figured world—figured I'm sure with divine sights and sounds. Have even teased Will, at times of our best closeness, about purchasing a huge hearing trumpet, inserting the small end in his ear, and listening at the bell end to what he himself is privileged to hear.

My occasional transports are never so lofty. My Imagination is so thoroughly housed in its body. Today after cleanup from dinner, I browsed Bysse's *Art of Poetry*. I know not what in particular had caught my eye when a Spirit told me direct to close the book, lay it on the table, then open it again at random to find my fortune. What should I find there but made me blush, a poem of ecstatic love by the woman Aphra Behn. Will so consumed with delight at my fortune tries his own and opens to the lofty Virgil set into English by John Dryden. Therein he finds himself identified with the "royal plant," the mountain oak with such "fixd foundations" as all the fury of all the elements cannot unearth.

He is quite taken with the poems, I can tell, and offers, "Here now, dear Kate, you must read yours aloud with feeling, for it will well become your expression. Let me hear a woman's sentiments on coital love, and as you dictate so shall I write, for this I must keep in my notebook. Then I'll read you mine while I transcribe it."

It's clear that Will cannot release me from this task, he is that set on my reading it aloud. At least, I beg him, give me a few minutes for study of the text so I don't lead your pen astray by reading errors. This he grants, and as I read, clearer and clearer to me is the cause of his robust joy. I think now I recall Behn lived partly as a youth with her father in Surinam, that same place of few laws where Will's friend Captain Stedman cavorted in his youth and found him a buxom slave for commonlaw wife, now abandoned for a finer English lady. But this is really reasoning after the poem which, it is true, has its beauty and also truth in its rapturous telling of experience. A juniper-tree looks down to see a young couple, enamoured, beneath its shady limbs:

I saw 'em kindle to desire
Whilst with soft sighs they blew the fire:
Saw the approaches of their joy,
He growing more fierce, and she less Coy,
Saw how they mingled melting Rays,
Exchanging Love a thousand ways.
Kind was the force on every side,
Her new desire she could not hide:
Nor wou'd the Shepherd be deny'd.
Impatient he waits no consent
But what she gave by Languishment,
The blessed Minute he pursu'd;
And now transported in his Arms,
Yields to the Conqueror all her Charmes,
His panting Breast, to hers now join'd,
They feast on Raptures unconfin'd;
Vast and Luxuriant, such as prove
The immortality of Love.
For who but a Divinitie,
Could mingle Souls to that Degree;
And melt 'em into Extasie.
Now like the *Phenix*, both Expire,
While from the Ashes of their fire,
Spring up a new, and soft desire.
Like Charmers, thrice they did invoke,
The God, and thrice new vigor took.

Behn's poem occupies my thoughts. Will teases me. Thinks it of vast import that a Spirit should direct me to a subject I shrank from speaking aloud, even to my husband. Time was I might

have feared his telling of such experience to MW, though now the poor woman is dead. Nor do I any longer fear that intimate acts between Will & me would be the subject they ever chose to discuss.

Still it is not a thing I easily find words for. It is not that I fail to understand the transports described in Aphra Behn's poem. Even the ending, neither its blending of God into the experience nor its joy in repeating the act three times in succession, can shock me or mark me a stranger.

It is now surely five years or more since such transports producing a vision of spiritual nature left me confused and frightened. The first time the gleaming bloomed from my body through William's lips and rippled from his mouth in song, I was terrified. For nights I would not even sleep in the same bedroom with the man, for fear someone was ensnaring us both in evil practice or that Will himself was the evil conjuror using my poor body. I said nothing of the sort, in fact said nothing at all at the time to William, but he by this time clearly recognized when my body was taken over by fear. He was patient without explanation, and waited until the fear began to recede beneath a tide of yearning: for once that door had revealed a secret world of beauty, I longed to see more of it but approached it more slowly.

Later there were months when my coupling vision was of a sacred Christian fish. Its scales were spun of gold, and soft, its only aim to swim like pure sunlight into my womb. My whole body shivered with his swimming, but he was also perennial warmth.

It never occurred to me that Will should be excluded from any things I saw or felt, and so in time I was able to speak of these things with him, though perhaps not so directly as I do here. And now, what of this poem of Aphra Behn? Somehow it is too public and too light of heart to match my life.

When we had come back and endured the trial, we were very compressed. Two rooms housed us. Besides ourselves, that included the press. What we couldn't fit into that space, we left with James at the Blake house.

For many months the exaltation of finding ourselves alive and safe was sustenance enough. Not only had I feared the outcome of the Scofield trial, but my own illness had threatened to take me away as well. When people say "worried to death," I think of that time in my life. My fears sprang up like mushrooms in the forest after a rainy spell.

When people we barely know mutter about Will's madness, it is for the most part because they themselves are so possessed by unquestioned conventions. Their lives float them along, and they see nothing of what's truly there. Nor do they have any wish to stop and see. Will meanwhile is a person examining the shape of a rock, feeling what's under the rock and behind the stars. In that way he approaches a commission. What he then retrieves from his Imagination is filled with such

a gamut, the entire stretch from rocks to star. The commissioner of the work meanwhile had in mind a replica of a cube wrapped in a square box tied with a red ribbon. Will's work is unsettling to such a person and certainly not what he had in mind. Will's very presence, such a comfort to me, makes that person deeply uncomfortable, and so he says Will must be mad.

For Will, such encounters with people are indeed maddening, but not in the ordinary way of that word. To him it is maddening to have his vision so little understood. His Imagination is never arrested by these woundings to his person. It continues to hope and be fruitful. Which makes him delicate in a strange way, though his appearance is so robust, his will so determined.

What I feared as the trial approached and I lay so ill was that all these accumulated misunderstandings would conspire against his sense of freedom, were he sent to prison. Not because of the physical loss of freedom in a prison cell, but the crowning injustice if Scofield's narrow world should triumph over the universe of heaven and earth that were Will's concern. In that way I feared my husband's finely tuned mind could lurch into some dark place where I might lose him.

All of these fears I eventually revealed to him during the months that followed the trial. We talked before, during, and after work. Gradually, I was unburdened. And felt cherished anew, for it was then that Will confessed his realizations about the crucial balance I provided for his life. He praised me for my loyalty and courage, which are not traits I would use to describe myself. He too had feared for his mind at that time, as I then learned. Not that he couldn't carry me with him wherever he was housed, for Will was gifted in presences. In fact, it was just at this time, in this aftermath of great fear, that Will began to instruct me in ways to develop a sense of his presence whether or not he was physically present. I suppose in some ways this sounds amusing. Here we were, squeezed into two rooms, most days and all nights, as I was learning to carry his presence with me immutably. But so it was.

Meanwhile, Will returned to *Milton*.

Catherine, I've had time now to look over some of your autobiographical fragments, and I notice the word jealousy crops up a few times.

Jealousy?

Yes, in describing the early years of your marriage, specifically. Would you say that you had jealous feelings about the late writer Mary Wollstonecraft?

Yes. Yes of course I would. It would be foolish and dishonest to answer otherwise.

Did you know her at all yourself?

No, only through some of her writings. And that was part of the difficulty for me, wasn't it?

That I knew of her primarily through William's admiration for her. At the time, she seemed to be everything I wasn't—fearless, extremely well-read, confident, articulate—certainly these are sufficient reasons for jealousy.

But you've always been a very attractive woman, and most especially in your youth I would presume. You really had little to fear in terms of losing your husband.

—I don't think we were talking about *losing*, but about jealousy. Clearly I was, no matter how unseemly in retrospect, especially now that the poor woman is no longer alive.

You see, I began to read her work openly only after she had died. Earlier, during the time I was so very jealous, I struggled through sections of her *Vindication*. Fine as the work may be, I abused it. Philosophy has not been familiar reading for me, even less so polemics. Novels, experiences, are books more to my liking, plus verse when read aloud. No, the Wollstonecraft *Vindication*, her tract for women, I mined for a few specifics I then used as evidence against Will.

Evidence of a liaison with Wollstonecraft? In the Vindication*?*

Evidence of how she had influenced his thinking. Will is ever guileless, but not without pride. The originality of his thinking—that and its consistency to divine inspiration—these have been items of some pride to him. I knew at the time he greatly admired her mind and her spirit. She also lived a state of freedom seldom achieved by men, and hardly ever by women. Not as a libertine, but having the courage and strength to live by principles of freedom and to meet their demands. I see that now. I also think the antimatrimonial ideas she and her Godwin both espoused (before marrying) were appealing to my husband at a time when we were up against some rough edges in one another. I had begun to see in Will an absolute insistence on purity in his art that fared badly in the world, which is where we earned our livelihood after all. He also chafed people's thoughts about propriety in a way that tickled him and caused us no end of trouble. On my part, since I had developed some skill at reading and writing living with William, my thinking had also developed and changed. Thoughts of my own had emerged that I was eager to argue where I dared. Where I dared was with my husband, the one I most trusted. These things were hard on both of us, and it was a time we thrashed about some. I felt a need to undermine her hold on him, which I did where he was most vulnerable—his fine and original mind.

It wasn't until two or three years after her death that I happened to read her *Short Residence in Sweden*. It records a remarkable journey of a woman who has great physical daring and who thinks confidently about business matters with people of other nationalities and languages. And I see a woman who embarked on this adventure out of her love for a man who probably didn't deserve or even return her devotion. Nevertheless she undertook the task and completed it, just as she was

delivered of the child that killed her out of love for Godwin. I dare say it seems Godwin *did* return her devotion, but what a terrible price she paid for love. I see now the tragedy and paradox of her life, but that is all in hindsight.

South Molton Street
October 1804

To My Friend in Imagination,

Something quite marvellous has happened in my husband which nevertheless is troubling to me. Someone must hear this of me. Lest I break faith with the beloved, let it be you, for I am swollen with troublesome worries by day and anxious dreams at night.

A week ago Wm attended an exhibition of paintings collected by a Mr Joseph Truchsessian and shown in a gallery here in London under his name. The gentleman, having gained a fortune in France, in money as well as in art, is said to have then lost the former in the recent Revolution. Thus he offers his collection for sale in our capital; our aristocrats have not suffered the economic losses of those in Paris. Of course my husband went, not to buy, merely to look. But merely is never the right word where Wm is concerned. Looking is for him a strenuous activity of body, mind, and spirit, as I will further explain.

I should say that among Truchsessian's art works displayed are masterpieces of the German painter/engravers Dürer and Schöngauer, the Flemish Massys, and from Italy Will's revered Michel Angelo. All of these my husband took in, and I am being literal to put it this way, for it seems his experience was one of drinking at a fountain an elixir he had not consumed since his youth. It took several hours and a night's sleep for results to emerge. Will had returned from the exhibition extremely preoccupied, lost in some inner ruminations, but I was in no way alarmed, since I am no longer jealous—now more accepting and in understanding—of this part of his nature. Preoccupied he was, but ever my dearest companion, and I think he whistled me through "Soldier's Joy" so I could sing it as I did the supper dishes before bed.

First thing in the morning it burst forth. He was fevered with it when he brought my tea, and he spoke so loud and fast my still sleepy mind barely followed what he was saying; it appeared more like loud military volleys to my unawakened senses. What struck me most, between and among his amazing descriptions of the glorious works he had viewed, was a refrain he repeated about having emerged from twenty years of darkness. Over and over he spoke the phrase, but with others tumbling out with such force I didn't dare attempt to break in and question the exact meaning of any one thing. I felt his experience was not about particulars, but rather large-scale

movement, and I had learned by now that any interrogation on particulars distracted both of us from getting to the core of what actually happened to Will in cases like this.

I continued to listen, now with even more attention as I was fully awake. Until midmorning I think we continued thus, I mostly listening but not entirely so, for I began interjecting thoughts and responses as he wound down a bit and moderated the rate at which his one sentence chased another. As I now understand it, Will feels he had a kind of revelation at the gallery—a kind of Intellectual Vision, he calls it.

Seeing all his masters grouped around him, each of whom was a particular inspiration during his youth, some wrenching change was wrought in him. It causes him to reassess the intervening time in a manner troubling to me, for, though I can never doubt that the revelations of Mr Truchsessian's masterpieces have been at the least a great inspiration to my beloved, other rumblings may trouble our very underpinnings. The nature of what our life together has actually been now undergoes in Will's mind a strange revision, baffling to my mind.

A short while after all this happened, he writes a long letter to Hayley, which he then reads aloud to me (again, with great excitement in his voice), as is our wont. A part of it reads, as I find in his draft,

> For now! O Glory! and O Delight! I have entirely reduced that spectrous Fiend to his station, whose annoyance has been the ruin of my labours for the last passed twenty years of my life. He is the enemy of conjugal love and is the Jupiter of the Greeks, an iron-hearted tyrant, the ruiner of ancient Greece. I speak with perfect confidence and certainty of the fact which has passed upon me. Nebuchadnezzar had seven times passed over him; I have had twenty; thank God I was not altogether a beast as he was; but I was a slave bound in a mill among beasts and devils; these beasts and devils are now, together with myself, become children of light and liberty, and my feet and my wife's feet are free from fetters.

That is only a piece of all that the letter contains. But it is surely the kernel of the disturbance for me. It suggests a maze of further confusions and negative possibilities to my thinking, and apparently to my dreaming mind as well.

First of all, what was my immediate response to hearing the letter? Not shaking or trembling, fainting or other typical womanly extremes. Stiff, like a block of frozen fear I was, out of total incomprehension. Not that William noticed at the time, because he was once again so feverish, as I've said. Simply writing the letter to Hayley, then recounting it aloud to me, had once again renewed the force of his experience. He had already spent all of a morning telling me about it. Now he was living in the new life and assumed I was in it with him. (He never looks back.) Then work overtook him immediately, feverish work on his own designs and engravings, interspersed with frequent trips for "attending to business," mostly to the publisher Phillips, I surmise.

And where was I now, this whole week past, where have I been? For now I have hidden myself from my husband in a way I haven't for years. I must puzzle this out for myself, and it occupies my real self through days and nights. First is the twenty years. Twenty years is almost exactly the length of time William and I have been man and wife. Twenty years, minus one or two, depending upon how you figure it, but the broad outline of twenty years is the span of our married life.

Next, who or—more likely—what great symbolic presence is "that spectrous Fiend" he writes of in the letter? I know of no self-critical faculty in my husband that censures what he produces, nor could it ever be said of me that I am critical of his work, I feel sure in my heart. Nor could it be the public at large, which has never driven William's choice of projects or subject matter so far as I know. It is always possible that William cares more than I believed for his reputation—or lack of it—in relation to so many visual artists inferior to him, poets like Hayley, fawned upon, yet no more than charm and convention, who nevertheless draw the public and even other artists like magnets. He would be less than human to care not at all; his self and his talent are large and robust, and demand expression. But that, at best, is a small piece of the puzzle. The Fiend is also "the enemy of conjugal love," says my husband and lover. That part fills my dreams with strange scenes of wandering through a maze of Battersea-like life, never being able to find my direction or even my true name, being once again incapable of reading, writing, or even speaking aloud.

Next comes Nebuchadnezzar, which has sent me to the Bible and The Book of Daniel, coming up with little more than the Babylonian king's madness, inflicted upon him for seven years because of lack of faith. Madness and eating grass like an ox, where Will is thankful for twenty years among beasts and devils. Who are now themselves enlightened, along with my husband! Everyone but me. Whose feet are now unfettered, along with his: unfettered feet have I, but not a tongue in my head to put my words to him direct.

Yours sincerely,
Catherine Blake

Asked whether I ever received answers from My Friend in Imagination, two come to mind. Directly, of course, through the mail, came no letter from that wise woman whose advice and understanding I craved. Indirectly, and gradually as I dared thaw the icy block of fear that had invaded my core, comforting presences joined me that were more like parts of my self I didn't know about. They showed me other ways of looking at William's words to Hayley that had seemed so rash and that had seemed to consign our married life to a circle of hell I didn't recognize.

"Catherine," said one, "you poor, frazzled creature, how could it possibly be your marriage he regrets when he speaks of 'twenty years'? Hasn't he been your sometimes-too-ardent lover for most

of that time? And hasn't he told you that you are the crucial balance for his life, his very mind? Hasn't he, and recently, praised you for your courage and loyalty? Rest in these things, and look elsewhere, look away from yourself to understand 'that spectrous Fiend.'"

"Kate, you numbskull," said a voice more cajoling, "the Fiend is the enemy of conjugal love; it is not conjugal love that is the enemy. The remarkable change that is wrought in him he says frees your feet as well as his. Look how you're distorting things!"

And so I began to look around, actually observe what might be different and what work absorbed him presently. In the first place, I could see he wasn't engraving other people's designs, or soliciting work of that kind. Immersing himself in both *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, though each so different from the other, he was returning to illuminated work. And though there were harsh and bitter words still coming from his newfound state, the illustrations teemed with light. One figure bore an orb of light, a towering naked hero emanated from nothing but light—it is not meant as a pun to say I could actually see Will's illumination in the work itself.

As for the Fiend, we finally began to talk around it. Call it the marketplace, where works of art are bought & sold, and artists bought & sold, and newest fashions in

art are peddled as exceptional classics. Call it repression of spirit, of bodily energy, of the few true germs of Christianity—all those things that mostly tortured and taunted my husband's desires. So many of these things I thought I had long ago recognized in him, but it seems that, drinking in his old masters, the real work and its genius deepened in him so that he feels himself transformed.

And even those harsh and bitter words I speak of, that so wounded me in sympathy when I read them, seem in themselves to carry him through to a new level of lyrical exaltation. His Preface to *Milton*, which I read for the first time the other day, shouts, in prophetic address:

> Rouze up O Young Men of the New Age! set your foreheads against the ignorant Hirelings! For we have Hirelings in the Camp, the Court, & the University: who would if they could, for ever depress Mental & prolong Corporeal War. Painters! on you I call! Sculptors! Architects! Suffer not the fashionable Fools to depress your powers by the prices they pretend to give for contemptible works or the expensive advertizing boasts that they make of such works; believe Christ & his Apostles that there is a Class of Men whose whole delight is in Destroying.

But then, just as quickly, all gives way to words that make me weep for the beauty that feeds him. Who else but Mr William Blake could pour beauty with such lyrical passion?

> We do not want either Greek or Roman Models if we are but just & true to our own Imaginations, those Worlds of Eternity in which we shall live for ever; in Jesus our Lord.
>
> And did those feet in ancient time,
> Walk upon Englands mountains green:
> And was the holy Lamb of God,
> On Englands pleasant pastures seen!
> And did the Countenance Divine,
> Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
> And was Jerusalem builded here,
> Among these dark Satanic Mills?
> Bring me my Bow of burning gold;
> Bring me my Arrows of desire:
> Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
> Bring me my Chariot of fire!
> I will not cease from Mental Fight,
> Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
> Till we have built Jerusalem,
> In Englands green & pleasant Land

Finally, he tags his visionary lyric by quoting a fervent plea from the Book of Numbers that prophecy—and its understanding—be available to everyone:

> Would to God that all the Lords' people were Prophets

Catherine, you sometimes speak of your life with William as though it were normal—not average, but normal.

I don't believe I ever said that. As a matter of fact, I consider it extraordinary and have put that in writing myself.

That's true, you have, but I don't think we are talking about the same thing. I'm speaking of a different aspect of your life with William Blake. I'm thinking now about your husband's work—the illuminated books in particular—in which you were an active participant. You mentioned that in the midst of all the fear, chaos, and disappointment that signalled your return from Felpham, "Will returned to Milton*."*

That's correct.

What you have described of your lives during that difficult transition hardly seems conducive to creative work. Yet here we have the beginnings of two monumental works, after a period of about ten years with no illuminated books. That is hard to conceive.

Mr Blake's creative work was not fed by outside events in our life. Indeed, less and less so as time went on. From the beginning this was true. His visions knew nothing of our time and space world. They might erupt at any time, and he felt it his duty to express them regardless of our particular circumstances in the world at the time.

Catherine, when I approach the work that is Jerusalem*, I'm overwhelmed. The names of the various characters and forces, for example, are nearly impossible to decipher and keep straight. The language is dense, and the illustrations are at once dazzlingly beautiful and bizarre. Surely you must have found some of these aspects of the work daunting as they first appeared to you—as you pulled them from the press, for example. What were your first thoughts, or had William explained it all to you beforehand, as he was setting down and engraving the plates?*

Daunting is a good word—dense is another I'd choose to describe the poetry, the language, of *Jerusalem* in particular. And no, he did not prepare me in any way for those plates, neither images nor text. I doubt that he himself knew until they emerged. I've heard people speak of Mr Blake's work as "springing from his fever'd brain"; more realistically the work poured from his hands and fingers, as I've watched it happen, and that's exactly as it appears to me.

But why all the strange names he uses? I mean, many of the religious themes in Jerusalem are recognizable, but Blake uses names like Vala, Enitharmon, Ulro, Urthona. Why not use names we at least recognize and therefore more easily can place and follow?

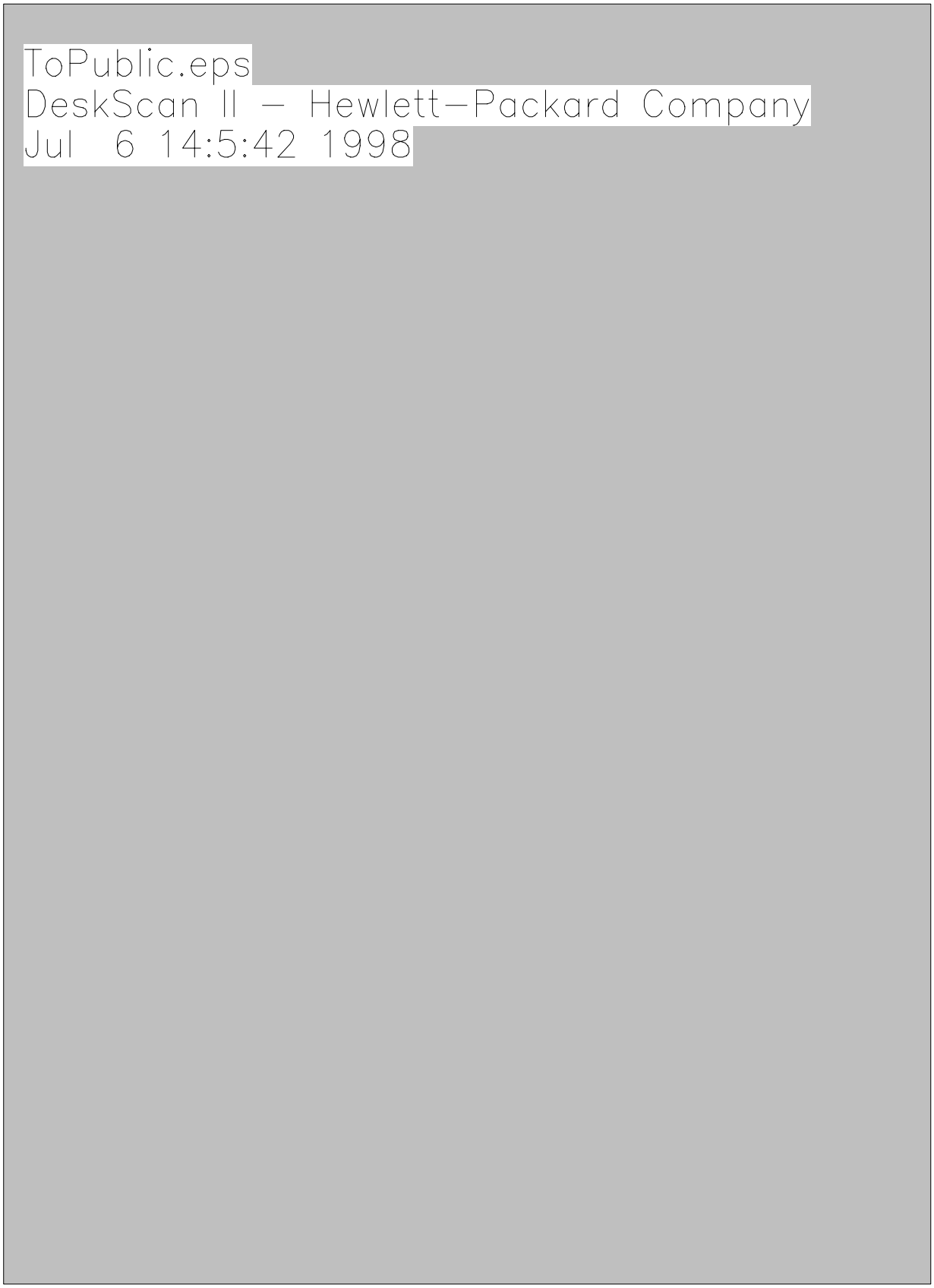
For that, we can all read the *Bible*, can't we? We all know those stories, prophecies and myths already. *Jerusalem* is Mr Blake's vision, the vision given to him. Think of the Creator naming all the animals and all the characters in the Bible. Similarly, my husband, as the creator of the illuminated book called *Jerusalem*, names the creatures who appear and act in it. You'll notice that in it all the various worlds that Wm moved in intermingle. So Mr Scofield appears in one of the plates, pictured in the company of Vala and Hyle, his head hanging forward in a posture of utter defeat and dragging behind him the mind-forg'd manacles my husband so pointedly identified. In the poem itself, he speaks directly of the man Scofield as well when he says

> The living and the dead shall be ground in our rumbling Mills
> For bread of the sons of Albion: of the Giants Hand and Scofield
> Scofield & Kox are let loose upon my Saxons! they accumulate
> A world in which man is by his Nature the Enemy of Man,
> In pride of selfhood unwieldy stretching out into Non Entity
> Generalizing Art & Science till Art & Science is lost.

That is quite straightforward I think. The meaning is clear. Then look at the end of the book, and see how another grouping of three figures completely transforms and redeems the trio that earlier included the lying scoundrel Scofield. You see, you need not understand every word to receive the meaning of the whole. It is more like listening to a large piece of music—think of those symphonies of Mr Haydn's that he brought to London. You can't possibly follow every note and pause, but by the end you have travelled with the composer through a rich experience, a journey through time. It is something like that with William's illuminated *Jerusalem*, except in his case it is not only through time (and the timeless) but through space as well, because of the beautiful printing of images and text that feast the eyes as well as the ears. What's more striking in the case of *Jerusalem*—and I'm surprised you didn't notice—are all the blank spaces in the opening message to the reader, which is titled "To the Public."

I don't think I saw any blank spaces.

Look carefully. They're there, all right, because William erased them out of the plate himself in a fit of pique. That was a terrible day! All that work and time, all the beauty that went into *Jerusalem*, and then on the very first page of text you see those strange sentences—almost as though he had castrated them. Anyone who thinks Will was all spirit, that his head was always in the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clouds, would think otherwise to have observed him that day. I was so upset I left the house and walked for hours and hours, refused to pull the plate or assist in any way with that page. Will was left with his spoiled plate and insisted on printing it just that way. I wonder had we been able to sell more copies, had we been asked for even a few, whether he would have cut a new plate or repaired that one. I never dared to ask, it was all such a disappointment.

I see now where there are a few words missing in the second sentence. Was this his way of censoring his own furious thoughts or feelings?

More apt to call it censureship, and not of himself, but of those many readers who choose to ignore his works of art, or who make no real attempt to understand what he produces. He left the first sentence, referring to our time in Felpham, intact: *After my three years slumber on the banks of the Ocean, I again display my giant forms to the Public: My former Giants & Fairies having reciev'd the highest reward possible:* …then, he can't stand it and strikes three lovely words from the sentence that follows, *love*, *friendship*, and *blessed*, so that for all posterity, it now reads *the _____ and _____ of those with whom to be connected, is to be _____ I cannot doubt that his more consolidated & extended Work will be as kindly received. The Enthusiasm of the following Poem, the Author hopes* …then follows a very large absolutely blank area after *the Author hopes*. I don't even remember exactly what it was that he said his hopes for the new work were, but the several lines that originally followed have simply been excised.

Not religiously, but sometimes of a Sunday we would leave off working for long walks, just the two of us. We were hardly alone on these walks, since a sizeable number of Londoners go out walking that day. Still it contented us to feel our limbs stretch and remove ourselves, like the birds, from city to suburb. In addition to suffering from coal dust and gas smells, such delicate creatures need trees for rookeries. London now affords so few nesting opportunities that none but a few brave sparrows, pigeons, kites, and rooks attempt to rear their young here.

In Felpham the air cleared, trees outnumbered buildings, and we heard all manner of birds in the stillness. We found that nesting was a feverish springtime activity, and in our first year we found a pair building under our very noses, they having found an ideal spot where the eave of our roof offered protection from wind and rain. They were grey wagtails, I believe, both male and female sporting little twitchy, notched tails rarely at rest. Once begun, the nest rose rapidly, and we were amazed to see the long stringy grasses that dripped out of their beaks turn into soft fluffy walls of great perfection. As the nest grew, the one with the fatter breast would settle in and rotate her whole body, shaping the inside to a perfect sphere.

The eave they had chosen was just outside our workroom that held the press, so we were able to watch the whole procedure most days. Their location was also very close to the front door to the cottage. Once we were sure the eggs had hatched and the parents taking turns endlessly darting in with insects for four hungry young, Will insisted we go in and out the far door, at the other end of the house. For a time, I delighted in teasing him about being overprotective. He had to remind me several times as I started for the front door without thinking. (It was easy to forget their presence if you weren't looking, because the babies were not chirping. In fact, the whole family conducted its activities in remarkable silence.) Then, one day, Will himself forgot, hurried out the front door, let it slam, and four startled shapes flew off in haste.

We didn't catch sight of them again and reproached ourselves often over the next few weeks when we saw the mother bird peer with confusion into her empty next. She seemed so bewildered, and we were chagrined. By this time it was early June. We stopped noticing and spoke of it as the incident of the brood we had unwittingly evicted. Then one day a lot of darting movements caught somebody's eyes, and we realized these grey wagtails were at it again, sprucing up the nest for a second try.

Our London lives hadn't taught us much about nesting habits, and we questioned local people about what seemed zealous parenting. Responses were vague and disinterested."Oh, yes, I think I've heard that it sometimes happens with some wagtails some years," was the gist of what we were told. By this time it didn't matter. We could see for ourselves just what was happening. We again restrained ourselves not to use the door that adjoined their nest, and this time I made no jokes about it. Somehow, the second brood took on an air of great seriousness right from the start, and we watched much more faithfully as we went about our daily work.

Everything about this batch was different from the earlier one. We saw their anxious beaks straining up over the side walls of the nest, and, almost as soon as we saw them, we began to hear them as well: faint cheepings, high and soft as if from afar. Within a few days we were able to distinguish four birdlings looking all beaks. Once again, mother and father darted back and forth with large squirming mouthfuls which they inserted into eager throats, sometimes waiting long enough to retrieve some kind of waste package from a chick before flying off for more food gathering.

It seemed barely a week before I one day spotted a singleton standing perched on one side of the nest. I signalled to Will, and we noted how much this fellow looked like a real bird, all that no-shapen fluff transformed into young bird with proud breast and even budding tail for twitching. Off and on that day, we would notice him, just standing at attention, quite oblivious when a parent rushed in to feed the others. The following day we noted his absence. Three remained, and they still

seeming quite huddled and unfinished-looking. The first one must have been precocious. Feeding continued unabated. A day or so later we suddenly realized there were only two in the nest and saw one tiny grey ball of fluff on the stones beneath. Either stunned or dead, it didn't move at all, and we worried about neighbouring cats and larger birds of marauding habits. Briefly we considered returning the chick to the nest, but feared the parents would have nothing to do with an offspring that smelled like human fingers stained with printer's ink.

Still, it was worrisome and difficult to do nothing about a situation of such distress. A few times the mother flew down to feed the fallen chick, and it seemed as if it might revive. Before long the parent left off, and it became clear to all of us it was no longer alive. By this time it was twilight and hard to see whether or where that tiny slate grey creature huddled. We resolved to give it a proper burial next day, quietly and without alarming either parents or remaining chicks, but we forgot.

Third day it was gone, our fears about marauders confirmed, as we thought. Meanwhile the parents were busy with the two hangers-on. One or another chick would make it up to the side as the first had done so quickly, only to back down into the nest, still looking rather lumpy and immature. Now both parents not only took turns providing frequent feedings but also fluttered to and fro as if giving flying lessons. They would nearly stop and tread the air with madly flapping wings for stretches of time; it looked to be a kind of demonstration. Over the course of the next few days, the lessons succeeded. The two youngsters left the nest, one at a time. We didn't see the actual events but first noted just one remained, and he looking larger, more mature, then saw that he too was gone. Of course their sounds had grown with their bodies all this time, and the day after, a Sunday, seemed strangely quiet. For the first time, Will went directly to inspect the nest, using the front door now that the nest was empty. I saw him start and turn, beckoning me urgently with one hand, the other softly held to his chest as if deeply moved.

"Look, Kate," he said, pointing up to the familiar nest, "look at that poor little beak." It was the dead chick, safe in the nest, limp beak still so oversized, just visible hanging over the edge. Under cover of darkness a parent must have transported him up. An ascension against being made a meal for the undeserving.

I fear I haven't talked sufficiently about our lives at Westminster Bridge, in Lambeth, where we lived for close to ten years before the time in Felpham. Our house at Hercules Buildings was the largest we were ever to inhabit. Inside were nine rooms; outside, gardens both front and back. Although the one in front was very modest, in back was fenced and private. In summer, clumps of

toasted orange Marygolds flourished alongside a grape vine that bore intermittently, seeming not to care whether pruned or not, a subject of some difference to William and me.

In truth, I was the expert in such growing things, which Will conceded from the first. Still, he preferred that growing things be wild and rampant: he was ever more concerned with feasting his eyes than filling his belly. The fig was a different story, always robust and productive of fruit year after year. It was Mr Blake's annual delight to observe the course of the fig's first fruiting. Come spring, he would wait for the swelling figs to appear on last year's new growth. They were green and rounded, but not perfectly round, with that special fig shape; they were also hard and naked, so exposed always to our eyes before the lobed leaves began to unfurl. The first time he noted the sequence he called me to the garden."Look, Kate, here is something biblical that is both frank and honest. See how those balls start out beautifully naked and then are covered over with the fig leaf! The sequence is true to the book—first the balls, then the leaves cover the embarrassment."

Back inside, the house was more than ample for the two of us. We were in the thick of printing illuminated books and cherished having the space for safely drying pages as we pulled them from the press. Though some were inked with colour before they went into the press, there was usually hand-colouring to follow. Never before had we enjoyed the luxury of work space that allowed us to spread out. The days of sharing space with Mr. Parker were behind us, although he and my husband still had a few engravings to produce between them.

I no longer needed to serve as shopkeeper, so I could have long stretches of uninterrupted work with Will. He had a few drawing students in the City, which took him across the bridge for stretches. He was always unduly generous with his time in this regard, I thought, and there were lessons that stretched into visits and even into meals. Not that I had any quarrel with his stepping out. In particular, it gave me time to order the house, for it was that large that it required ample time to clean it entire. Perhaps I make it sound as if the task were onerous, which I do not intend. Everything about the house in Lambeth pleased me—its generous spaces, the sense of light where it was windowed both front and back, but safe shelter and interesting shadows provided at the same time. Still, it was a messy business we were engaged in, with soil from the inks, scraps of paper, smidgens of metal bitten from plates. Besides that, Will was often experimenting with new ways to prepare a plate, better grounding plus more effective resistance and so on.

In warm weather I insisted the windows be opened. Noisy or not, I craved the warm breezes, though they also bore the coal dust for which our city of London is known world-over. It gives a remarkable glow to the air over the Thames, sometimes peachy salmon mixed with oyster and blue I've seen, that makes it a favourite of painters. It is still dust, for all that lustrous colouring of air, and once it enters the house, it settles everywhere as dark soot .

Actually, there was a time when we kept a servant, a girl from the environs of my parental family. Friends had pressed us to do so upon seeing where we now lived, and I at some point agreed. Nancy Flaxman in particular was adamant about my need for help, when she and her husband returned from living in Rome and first visited us at Hercules Buildings. It was at that point I agreed to hire someone and found Dora.

You might think it a blessing, but it turned out to be otherwise. We first tried having her live with us, thinking that the most economical arrangement. Dora was red-cheeked and sturdy, stout legs like those turned for dining tables. She was cheerful and curious, being traits that Will and I both valued, though she was very puzzled by the amount of industry she observed in our work. She also seemed confused by our sometimes erratic schedule, it also being dictated entirely by the work rather than the clock.

Soon after her arrival, Dora asked for a uniform, at least one, and better two, for the sake of laundering of the other she said. Women I met and knew at market (I still insisted on buying our food myself) urged the same. I was against the idea, but I wasn't sure why. Reluctantly I brought it up with Will. He considered it as seriously as I. We must have spent at least an hour discussing it and at last concluded against it. Both of us agreed that work clothes were in order for all of us who worked, but uniforms seemed a badge of some artificial privilege or punishment (as with the criminal or insane as much as with the monarch or barrister), and, if she needed to make a statement about her position or duties, it must come from inside.

This turned out to be a great disappointment to Dora. In order to mollify the decision, I offered to teach her to read and write, thinking what an advance that had made in my own life. Nancy Flaxman, when I encountered her next on the streets of London, was opposed to my offering, and she enumerated the advantages to us of Dora's illiteracy. Furthermore, she said, after asking some more questions about the situation, I wasn't doing my part to *train* the girl. This seemed to her the most crucial aspect of hiring and keeping a servant. I in my turn protested that no one had trained me to cook or to clean, that it was simply part of growing up in a family that worked and ate. Even Will, as a man, was capable of cleaning up after his work and more efficiently than myself, in addition to being the one who prepared and served me tea upon arising. Surely no one trained William Blake to domestic chores, I pointed out. Not a word of which impressed Mrs Flaxman as relevant, and I then left, somewhat confused about my own responsibilities in the matter.

Fortunately, as I might have known and counted on, William was in complete agreement with me. He thought teaching reading and writing skills to Dora could only improve my own into the bargain. It turned out that Dora herself *wasn't* eager to learn at all, whether due to my shortcomings as teacher or hers as pupil. It became a trial and without any benefits.

In addition, Dora began to mistake my eagerness to help her learn with a kind of girlish notion of chumminess. She began complaining to me about various habits of Will's that were perfectly normal for my husband, or at the worst perhaps considered eccentricities by some, and I told her as much. It became clear that he and she were taking a dislike for one another, and it was soon openly uncomfortable having such a third person among us, especially sleeping under our roof and having at least one meal a day with us. The latter was Will's idea of his contribution to her education—having conversation at table that would stimulate her mind. It turned out to be like talking to the proverbial post, except it was a post given to rolling its eyes in response to our conversation whether or not it was directed at her.

We next decided to pay her a bit more and have her live under her own roof. She reminded us that her family lived at too great a distance to make it workable for her to live at home. At the same time she desperately professed a wish to continue earning money with us. After some searching, I found her an inexpensive room in the neighbourhood. A new chapter then began with all smiles and without any shared meals. Things were better for a month or so. Whereupon she began arriving much later than we had agreed, developing illnesses that prevented her arrival altogether, until finally—after losing all of her round rosiness and becoming frequently unsteady on her feet—it became clear to us that she was living on gin rather than food, and we had to disentangle ourselves entirely from her life. We chalked it up to the kind of experience required for enlightenment and returned full attention to our work, discovering with some surprise that we actually had more time for it without than with our "servant." Nor did we make other attempts at any future time. We realized we were neither of us fussy about cooking and cleaning to begin with.

Very early in our marriage there was the issue I've already explained: I needed more breathing room. In addition to my taking walks, Will's trips into the City gave me another opportunity to breathe my own air and investigate some of the arts and letters that he so eagerly provided me, and without any scrutiny or even direction in my pursuit.

That seems straightforward and easy to understand in the case of a person who comes to literacy as an adult, with all the doors quite suddenly thrown open by a man with a voracious mind and opinions formed by years of very active imagining, reading and reflection. More complex are the reasons I felt it so important to my husband's *own* development that he take advantage of any opportunities as teacher or colleague.

Being with people wasn't easy for Will. It was hard work from beginning to end. When he met with the regulars at Mr Johnson's, the publisher who initially gave so many engraving jobs to Will, he was frequently stimulated and bubbly when he returned, but it seemed obvious he understood

more of them then they of him. It was Will who sensed the danger to Tom Paine's person when British authorities spread their nets. It was Will who convinced him of his urgent remove to France. His drinking and coarse manners never obscured the sincerity and intelligence of the man. Yet Paine hadn't the least understanding of what Will was about; at least, he never took the time to appreciate the vision that lay behind Will's deep immersion in the process of producing the illuminated books, nor the freshness of his religious outlook. In fact, none of those revolutionaries could think of anything outside the ideal of replacing monarchy with republic. It made Will an outsider in the group; his passions bewildered them.

Tending to the religious question was of enormous importance for Will. Since my father had been a Dissenter, I came to the marriage with an appreciation for the way Dissenters tended to understand things—as being more complex than the way they were presented, while others were always trying to wedge them into one or another established group, with answers simplified and compromised. Will of course was never a joiner anyway, nor was I for that matter, but for somewhat different reasons.

Fairly early in our marriage—I think it was the same year as the taking of the Bastille in France—my husband and I attended an organizational meeting for a New Church founded on the writings of Emmanuel Swedenborg, the Swedish moralist philosopher. Will had read several of his books, parts of them aloud to me, along with assents and disagreements that he wrote in the margins. At the very least, Will was deeply moved by the sincerity of the man's visionary life and had great sympathy with his fortitude in withstanding a heresy trial that resulted in banning his theological works in his native country. (Our freedom of the press is something that always made us proud to be British; in England we had his books in Latin and some put into English as well.) Of course there was much more that Will deeply admired in the man's philosophy, but there was that other thing that crept in as well: if Will was deeply moved by a person's thinking, if he truly admired the person's Imagination, so much more passionately disappointed was he by those points he deeply disagreed with. Further, he felt a moral responsibility then to answer those things he disagreed with—to respond by what appeared to him to be correcting wayward paths the person had taken in his reasoning about things.

At the time the New Church was forming in London, Swedenborg's style and vocabulary were still difficult for me as a reader, but from the things Will had read aloud to me and the talking we did, I found agreement with enough of it to feel comfortable exploring the possibility of participating in a group of his adherents. Besides, I was curious. I was not regularly churched as a youngster and wondered what it would be to build a church without the priestly hocus pocus I knew to be a part of popery and of Church of England as well.

It was springtime I remember; we were living in Poland Street at the time, and we set out for the first of what promised to be a three-day General Conference well scrubbed and with reasonably high expectations.

The company was august in a good, down-to-earth way. Two prominent Swedenborgians immediately caught my ear, with marked accents derived from the Swedish language that gave our English a lilt and cadence closer to music than anything I'd ever heard before. Not that I hadn't heard that Nordic language in the City before; walking in London's streets, or even working in father's market as a girl, I heard tongues from everywhere; but it's different when you hear those foreign tongues speaking English and have a want to understand the thoughts behind the words. It was enchanting. When either of them spoke, I heard words and music more than meaning.

As to the rest of the company, much to our relief no powdered wigs appeared among the men, and the women's bonnets were scarcely more ostentatious than my own. Some of the women present were not afraid to express their views, though I noted they were not listened to with the same degree of silence by those attending as men were, a fact which gave me discomfort, sympathizing with the degree of courage it takes for a woman to speak so publicly. I brought it up with William when we were reviewing the events of the day at home after supper. He had observed the same phenomenon and wondered whether the resonance and deeper timbre of the male voice commands more attention by its nature. I have my doubts.

So much disillusionment with the New Jerusalem Church followed in the next few years that it's hard to recapture the excitement we felt at that first gathering. At that time there was not yet any talk of liturgy, vestments, official hymn books or any of the typical accretions of power that seem inevitably to be part of institutionalized religion. Nor had the big fuss over the issue of concubinage erupted that led to the dismissal of some of the group's most creative thinkers. All of that came in subsequent years, by which time Will and I no longer had any interest in being regular participants in the group. In fact, most of the issues just mentioned we learned about secondhand; thus I should not even be making judgements about them, however tempting.

No, that first General Conference had about it the excitement of new possibilities in exploring spiritual matters honoured in common. In spite of the inevitable restlessness that set in by the third day, we came away having assented to no fewer than forty-two propositions. Will and I gave our assent by signing our names in the Minute Book with nearly everyone else who had attended, and I wrote my full name with real fluency and assurance. Those principles of Swedenborg I was most eager to affirm had to do with his beliefs about slavery and about the right of women to enfranchisement. Many still do not realize the strength of his arguments against slavery. He maintained that the native people in Africa's interior still have a direct intuition of God. He urged the freedom

of slaves. In fact, it was a group of Swedenborg's followers in his native country who began the first society for abolition, and one of them, named Wadström, attended that first General Conference in London. He was one of those I mentioned with the musical way of speaking. I also was in accord with the propositions affirming free will and condemning predestination, always one of the most important issues for Will and me.

I was somewhat amazed at the Swedenborgian declaration that in 1757 a Last Judgment had taken place, that being the very year of my husband's birth. I had not known of that statement before attending the Conference. It was a striking possibility: Swedenborg himself being a man who had received visions throughout his life and who stated categorically that he had maintained his reason at the same time. That is, he was not in an out-of-flesh state, simply in an ecstatic, receptive one. Like Will.

I find myself wondering how you ate after returning to London, when your living circumstances were so reduced.

Do you mean in summer or winter?

Either one; it's just hard to imagine cooking, working, and living in two rooms. Did you bake your own bread, for instance?

I never did that. London has fine bakers; anywhere in the City you can find bakeries. Also, when bread was most scarce, in those days we all feared for war with France, it was probably harder to get decent flour than bread. But by the time we were in Poland Street, when our own funds were so low, it was easier to get decent bread and it wasn't so punishingly expensive. At that time, things were really changing. The City was beginning to experiment with gaslight—in the most privileged neighbourhoods of course, starting with the environs of Buckingham Palace. Nevertheless, it was coming, and it promised that traveling in the City at night would be safer and easier. At the same time, the smell of the gas was hideous and lingered for hours into the day, after the lamps were extinguished. Also William and I were using coal rather than wood to cook, by the time we returned from Felpham. The soot was nasty as I've said elsewhere, but the heat was welcome and burned more slowly and steadily than wood. We felt it safer—after a terrible fire that had gutted thousands of houses, including all the houses on London Bridge.

And what was the difference between summer and winter?

Well, in summer the last thing we wanted to do was light *any* kind of fire, producing heat, which we already had in plenty. What we ate then was cold, a lot of it even uncooked—salad vegetables

from the market like lettuces and carrots, radishes and cucumbers. Fruit was plentiful as well—we both loved the bramble fruits and berries that came at that time of year. Milk or cream that soured in the heat was still good for topping the fruit, mixed with a bit of honey.

And in winter?

Well in winter we kept the fire burning constantly if possible, not that it always lasted through the night. Most mornings, Will was first up, often well before it was light. He would see to the fire, build it anew if it required, and set the kettle boiling for tea as soon as he heard me stir. We toasted slices of a loaf from the nearby baker for our breakfast, and from that time on the cooking fell to me, but simple. Wm was not fussy about that at all, thank goodness, and always professed pleasant surprise at the tastiness of what I was able to produce on a minimum of funds.

Did you eat meat?

We had a big pot to hang over the grate in winter, and into it went the salted or smoked joint if we had one, then the one or two puddings and perhaps a cabbage as well. But that food could serve for several dinners in winter.

Puddings—you mean sweets?

Perhaps—yes, if we had apples, raisins or other dried fruits or honey, stale bread. But we also eat puddings that are not sweet. I might use flour, a little suet and potherbs for savory, wrapped them in the gauzy pudding cloth and boiled it along with the joint and cabbage. If we could afford eggs, we added a few of them into the pudding. Everything fit into the big pot, and what remained would be stored in bowls.

Did you never go out for meals?

Oh, occasionally we would be so tired and busy with our work we would eat at the pub tavern, where the meat and fowl might be grilled on a spit, which was a nice change from boiled food. But it was still more economical to eat at home. Besides, we weren't either of us big drinkers, which was the prime activity at our local public house.

When Will and I were young, and into our Lambeth days, we did some foraging that was part of the enjoyment on our long walks. Especially in spring and fall, we would try to remember to carry sacks for wild greens—mustards and dandelions in early spring and mushrooms in spring or fall if we had rain sufficient to bring them on. Berries in summer—mulberries or currants, for example. We had our haunts where we could count on finding things from year to year, but there were always surprises as well.

What about in Felpham? Did you grow a garden for food there?

Actually we grew some vegetables and fruit in Lambeth, behind our house, in the back garden at Hercules Buildings. But, yes, I tried my hand at Felpham. Will wasn't really interested in gardening. He was appreciative of everything that grew, flowered and fruited, but that wasn't the way he enjoyed spending his free hours. Don't forget, Mr Hayley kept him busy with all the miniatures he was so set on as adornment to his library. We really had a lot of projects at Felpham, and very few of them were of Will's own choosing. So when he had some spare hours, he was more apt to work on one of his own and be grateful for the time. And something about the salt sea and air stimulated his mind for seeing visions. He might wander to the edge of the water, walk a bit, then sit and allow the visions to come to him—spirits and fairies—he reported all kinds of visions during that period of our lives.

That sounds like the source of some good illustrations. Did he take drawing materials with him on these contemplative walks?

Never. You know how he regards drawing from models. He has made no secret of his scorn for what he calls copies as opposed to originals. No, he might very well draw or paint from those visions that befell him on a stroll or resting in the garden, but he would then conjure them from his mind in the workroom with his familiar tools to hand. Occasionally, I suppose he might have carried his notebook with him when he went off for a sitting at the shore, but even that was rare. His notebook was filled in at home, usually in my presence and often as he or I hummed a tune. I might be sewing or mending with one or the other of us humming some music.

He liked writing in my presence. Not that we needed to talk, but he liked having me there, as witness I think, and I have no doubt his brother Robert was there as well from time to time. Sometimes, he would even interrupt himself. "Kate," he would call, "Kate, are you with me?" And he waited for my answer before turning back to his notebook or his plate, whatever it was that had seized him. Or he might caress me lightly, around my shoulders or my bottom, sort of tracing my form with a warm movement and smile. I could be cooking or reading—or the sewing I mentioned that was a constant for clothing ourselves—it was just a way of locating my body in relation to his, I think, and very reassuring to us both. That never changed with age.

We lived close to twenty years at the rooms on South Molton Street. They were a struggle for us, and even now the changes wrought in Will and myself over those years remain something of a muddle for me to try to sort out. By the time I was able to grasp what had really happened to my husband following his visit to Truchsessian's Gallery, and understand that it did not reflect badly

on our twenty-some-year marriage, I discovered as well that we were living in two different spheres much of the time. He was more and more often in Paradise, working feverishly on three monumental projects at once. Those were *Milton*, *Jerusalem*, and one that never actually was printed though he had worked on it more than twenty years, that he called *Vala* at first and then *The Four Zoas* as it went along.

With his creative forces so engaged as to anchor him thus elsewhere, some remnant of the man was making havoc where we made our living. Which was where I mostly lived during this same period, thinking it must be my job—that one of us needed to attempt at putting some order to our shambles. I can only suggest a few of the things that come to mind by way of illustrating Will's erratic participation in the material side of our life.

One concerned our close friend Thomas Butts, also something of a patron, quietly contributing small but regular monies at this time. He wrote requesting to buy several of our illuminated books for a friend who had admired the copies Mr Butts had purchased. William refused, though we needed the money, by saying he was too deeply immersed in other work. This was true of course, but also true was the fact that some of the work requested for purchase was partly ready, and would have taken little time for us to complete.

Another instance was a series of tangles William had with young Mr Cromek, who was a book publisher and seller, and had himself been trained as an engraver. Mr Cromek was just starting his book business when he commissioned William for designs to Robert Blair's long poem, *The Grave*. The project at first showed great promise for us, with Will's designs displayed in Cromek's shop and subscriptions promised. The understanding was that Will would engrave his own designs and he had just begun doing that when—having seen only the first one—Cromek engaged his friend Schiavonetti to do all of the engravings in a more traditional style. Then the newspapers were merciless in their criticism of Will's designs.

The rift between Cromek and my husband became irreparable over a huge painting of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims setting out on horses from London. Will had told Cromek of his plan to design and engrave such a work and was dumbfounded when Cromek commissioned a painter friend of Will's from early times, Mr Thomas Stothard, to do the painting. After promoting the painting to great effect, Cromek then had it engraved by Shiavonetti. This put an end to Will's relationship with both Cromek and Stothard, and, though Will went on to do his own version of the scene, it never had the backing and promotion it needed to attract subscriptions.

And such events had further effects on us, involving our standing with Mr Hayley, Mr Flaxman, Mr Malkin, even Mr Fuseli—all of them artists, or at least men disposed to have a good opinion of my husband's art and person. Questions about Will's sanity were bandied about. It was as if, at one

and the same time that part of William deepened his grounding in Paradise, another part of him—and taking me in tow—became a furious whirlwind or hurricane that raged and returned back and forth over our lives without mercy. And just exactly where was I for the duration of this storm, I ask myself, now that I am on its far side?

In hindsight, it seems my life also took two different forms. One was the Kate who counted money, guarded the few guineas put away for that time of last resort, and looked for work. Not that Will realized any of these things. I just did them, almost as a ritual, and with great frequency. About the work possibilities, I mostly schemed, taking long walks to escape the two rooms on South Molton St, where I was convinced the very walls could sense my agitation. It wasn't that WB lacked the energy for work at this time, just that he was burning more bridges than he was building.

One idea for work I did pursue for a time was a scheme for printing for the blind. Several facilities for people both poor and blind had started in England around this time. The one I knew of in London was at St George's Fields, and it was not just a school for training voices and singing lovely anthems like the one in Liverpool. This one actually taught indigent blind people to read and, eventually, to learn simple skills like knitting, making household linens, and basketmaking—skills enabling them to earn an honest living. It was the reading that intrigued me, because they used a method devised by a Mr Alston that employed raised or embossed letters. My heart went out to people learning to read at any age, for the difference it might make to their chances in life.

Unbeknownst to my husband, I made a formal visit to the Dog & Duck premises, where the School for the Indigent Blind was located. This in itself was an undertaking of some courage for me, so unaccustomed to dealing with strangers about business except in our own work place, at home. I determined to make it a simple visit, with no particular intentions in mind other than observation. Those running such philanthropic institutions are always pleased to bring their accomplishments to the attention of the public, and so I was made welcome. The music I heard was impressive. The unanimity of their choral singing was hard to fathom. These sightless people sang together as one, and I was led to consider anew the old saw that when one sense is lost, others can be enhanced beyond the ordinary. The beauty of the music-making gave me courage sufficient to speak with one of the teachers there about their method of teaching reading to students who were blind.

As a result of our interview, I had the chance to look at their reading materials. The whole of the Old and New Testaments they had produced for the students in the Alston raised type. Feeling the pages with my fingers was not so strange for me, accustomed to our intaglio plates and Will's method of writing on them, albeit backward. What *was* different was the way in which the letters were formed—a particular hand designed for uniformity and easy recognition. There was no more

beauty in it to the touch than there was to the seeing eye. The students had for their further instruction the Liturgy of the Church of England, which to my mind also leaned towards making them all rather uniform, even a bit slavish, in their thinking.

This gave me the idea what a benefit it might be to such people to have works of more Imagination at their fingertips. My thought was that engravings—not just the plates but the finished ones on paper—had enough definition to be understood by hands so sensitized. Perhaps they could get poetry and pictures from such an experience. Before I was able to explain much of this to the teacher, I was routed to someone of higher authority to whom I explained the idea that was growing in me. His immediate reactions, looking at me with eyes remarkably dulled, were just two. The first was a cursory acknowledgement that gifts of such printed materials would always be welcome. So went my notion of paid work for Will and me. Then the second, which by implication might contradict the first, was to ask about the beliefs and church practices of the persons who would be responsible for such works—the poet, the artist, the printer. Were they regular Church of England? So as not to confuse the poor students or lead them astray, I suppose. Thus ended our interview, along with one of the many work ideas I pursued.

This part of me continued in its duties with dogged regularity, with its worries and chasing after one scheme or another, even including such as paid outside housework. This, after I've already confessed how little either Will or I cared about the routines of dusting and fussing over household items, much less all those ugly little trinkets that most people display as dust collectors.

Yet, another part of me was moving and changing and pondering things important but not yet accessible to me. This is the part of me that looked at sketches of Will's for *The Four Zoas* and wondered just who would ever understand its honesty and sacredness.

My disposition today is sour. Late in the morning Will is off altercating some project that no doubt offends somebody and then founders on its principles. I am left to set food in the pot for slow cooking, which seems a weary task of scant variety.

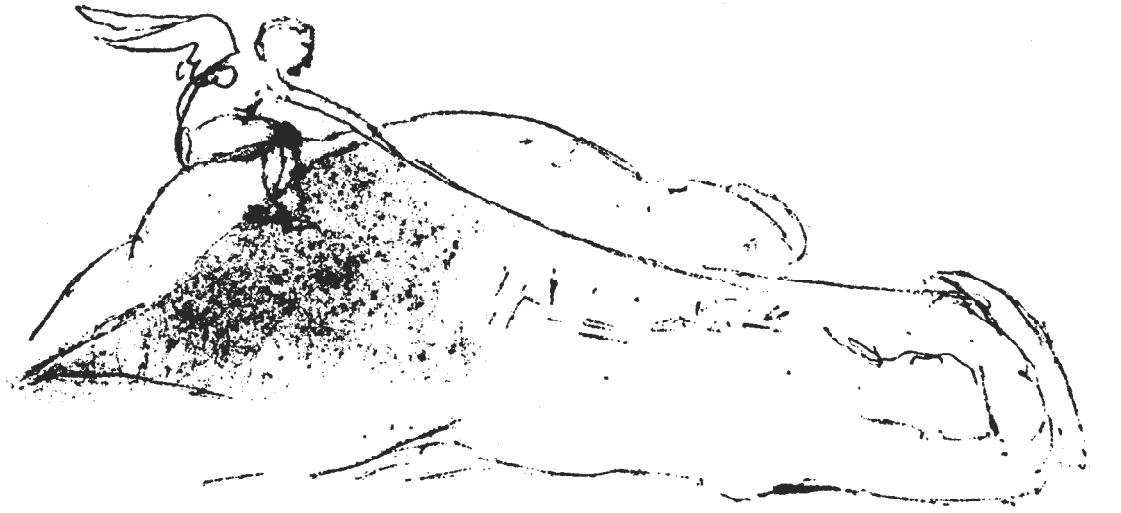
There seems not to be space enough here, in this same room where we work, sleep, and eat, to prepare food for cooking. I allow myself to think back with longing to the spaciousness of our rooms at Hercules Buildings where food preparation and art works never shared the same table.

And yet my husband's working habits are meticulous, I must admit, a fact I rarely notice or appreciate. Tidy and economical in his work I should say, with evidence of *Milton*, *Jerusalem*, and *Vala*, ranged, each in its own pile, each waiting its turn for inspired furtherance. Of the three, *Vala*, which he lately calls *The Four Zoas*, has occupied him the longest. It is the one he has spoken of the

least, though I have lately seen him most engrossed in it. Of the other two, I have already pulled early proofs for a few pages and have a good sense for their progress.

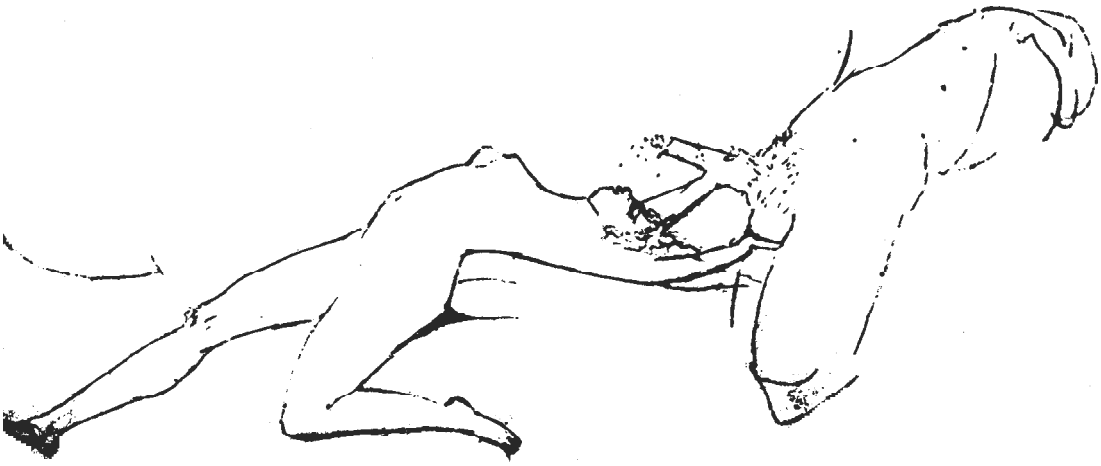
The Four Zoas remains entirely in manuscript. I've seen little of its content, except to note that Will now uses the proofs from Young's *Night Thoughts* as a kind of template for its working out. I'm not sure whether the practice came about through necessity—the funds for using new leaves of the expensive Whatman paper having come to an end—or his actual preference for the shape and layout of the *Night Thoughts.*

As you look at the title page, it appears that nine dream-filled plans are projected, though even that much is hard to be sure of, with many of the several lines crossed out since its first beginnings in 1797. Inside, he's worked through Night the Third, writing the texts of his poem in the rectangle left empty for the printing of the Young poem, but leaving his decorations in place around the text. Then he turns the proof pages over and writes the next part of his own poem in roughly the same space with entirely new drawings sketched in pencil.

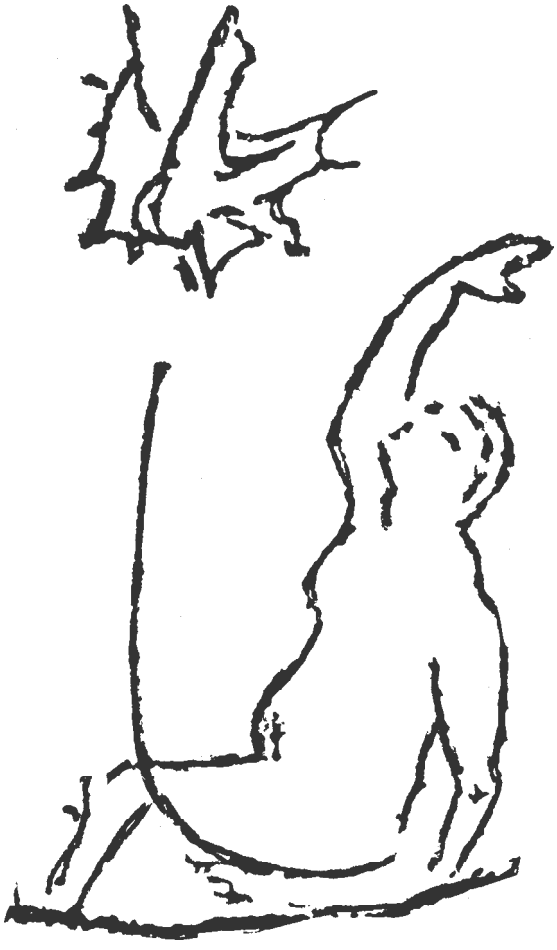


Whence such strange images?—phalluses, erect and swollen, shamelessly rendered. Where in your Imagination, Mr William Blake, I often wonder and will some time ask. Is the source companion to your thinking mind, or buried deeply in your very bowels, in some wild genital apparatus that flowers in you alone? Just where would we find it if we wanted, for scrutiny? For, make no mistake on it, now that I look and focus on this manuscript, I know it would never bear the scrutiny of favoured London critics.

If such judging men were to see this manuscript, you would instantly be condemned—no trial at all. For if "absurd designs of a morbid madman" was the way they vilified you in *The Examiner* for Blair's *Grave,* think what poison these images from *Vala* could evoke from critics' pens. I can just hear their words, sounding like gong beats on finely hammered bronze, or a whole set of broad-bladed knives razor sharp.



And do we not live in times where ironic words are illustrated in our newspapers with broadly exaggerated, gestural drawings—fine-figured men and women bloated or shrivelled out of all decent proportion? So the critical appraisal of *Vala* would bear with it a caricature of my husband, wildly exaggerated, but after the manner of the Phillips portrait lately engraved of him by Mr Schiavonetti, with eyes bulging and popped, looking for all the world like a pondish bullfrog, bloated with all that is rank and reptilian.

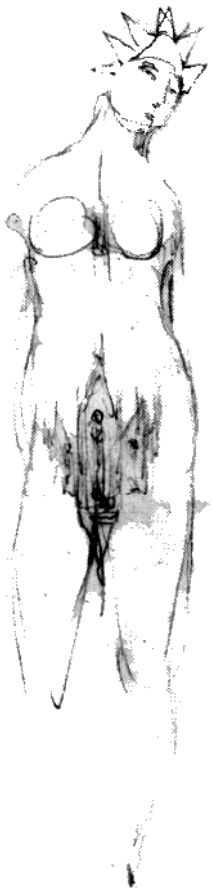


Or perhaps someone would undertake the mapping of Will's Imagination as illustration, a villainously delicious project for some ambitious cartographer. For a mapping has even occurred recently, more than once, to myself. What might it look like—a map of that dear wild man's Imagination? Seas, and more seas, deep and treacherous with power and sweep, surround and wash the island of his intellect, for it would have to appear somewhere there, the island that is, like England. His home, yes, but submerged in a thing much more powerful and fecund. Dangerous shoals and rocks emerge for delineation, but not soon enough to warn of their sharp, shipwrecking promises.

Maybe then each of his published works so far—even those that were mutually produced between us—can be placed on the map, each assigned a specific location as to east or west, landlocked or tossed out from the sea. People then drawn in, whole cara-

vans of the mythical creatures and humans who have been given life on his pages. All such energetic forms threading the compass rose in this rare map.

But what of the forms in *Vala* so far? What if they're seen in daylight, not just by my loving eyes, who recognize their deep powers and delights, but by the cold eyes of the cruel critic and the ambitious cartographer? How would they place these free-floated phalluses? Large phallus with string, a scrotum mounted by joyously-driving Cupid holding a taut-reined phallus from his mounted perch above. An ecstatic woman, replacing the joyous Cupid, stretches her arched, dancing torso backward: her hand now cups the scrotum, awaiting its inevitable wetness. A flying phallus, looking for all the world like a bat escaped from captivity, delineating a life of its own, escapes the will of the man who would push it down and drive it back into the secrecy of clothing and repressed desire.



Not even I, who so deeply love and revere this man—more so after the plus-twenty-five years that have flown between us—not even I can accurately place them on the map of Will's Imagination, though in my own being I can truly recognize and entertain them, inchoate as they may be within me. For one among the figures here that I've gazed upon this morning actually comes from a strange dream I reported to my husband. I see it rendered—see *her* rendered actually—for she is a women done in rough sketch with a pencil. She is a proud female figure ranged vertically all up and down the left of the lines of the poem she illustrates. Pictured naked and frontal, we see her. She holds arms behind her, the better for us to see what's most prominent on her: arrayed all among her genitals is an altar in pointed Gothic facade, a kind of diagonally-angled, sacred front where a garden lies hidden. She presents herself not only as woman of sacred sex, but, because of the verticality of the facade, as androgynous creature.

Now who, I ask myself, will rightly understand or accept its nature when I, whose dream actually housed her, could report next morning only confusion and curiosity? Not even William can tell her precise origins, whether of his wife or himself doesn't matter, though he has depicted her quite precisely as I described her appearance to him. Rightly understood or not, the creature I know has had a life in me, but I know as well she should never see the light of the world in a published book. Nor should she dare to be located on that map of Mr Blake's Imagination. For what then would be the words of the rancorous critic about the mind of the artist who chooses to render such a form? Not just morbidly insane or fever-brained, this, but more in the realm of blasphemy

and perversion. And this stated with much more cleverness and self-advertised, witty intellect than I could ever muster. Might Will now possibly persist, seek this out as crown for his unbowed, bloody martyr's head? It takes my life's breath to think it.

Will returns in deep high spirits, which sounds contrary but isn't. Since the revelation from Truchsessian's Gallery took hold, his high spirits when at home no longer seem to carry off the top of his head. They rise from quieter joy. He has brought me spring's most fragrant blooms—apple blossoms, bluebells, and ropes of honeysuckle collected in a bunch—and presents them in a lovely pot of an intense Prussian blue, small and well-turned, whose shape I love to feel.

There is more. As dinner bubbles its fragrance from the pot, he shares news of his day so far. Someone has remembered to pay him for work finished long before, now a welcome surprise for us both. He has seen a pantomime creating quiet scenes, while London resounds with bells rung for a royal birthday, hundreds of bells simultaneously demanding attention, if not grovelling, from all citizens with ears. Will describes the pantomime with quiet delight, not a word, but mimics for my pleasure and with surprising grace the dance that he saw.

We admire the flowers, turning the little pot this way and that to determine the best side for our viewing that will allow the ever-changing window light to intensify the colors of petals. Then he notices how I've coloured up, the blushes spreading around my neck and face exposed, simply from having thoughts from underneath about the images I viewed this morning. When questioned, I tell him directly: evasive games would never hold between us.

"I see you've hoisted a dream of mine for your *Four Zoas*," I begin.

"Ah, good, Kate," says he, "so you've taken time with *The Four Zoas* at last. And can you tell me what you think of the poem?"

"I haven't even tried reading a bit of the poem so far. I've only been viewing the images."

"And what do you think of the images? Do you recognize them, any or all of them?"

Too quickly I answer, "Well yes, I do, the tall woman with the Gothic facade for her sex, from the dream I described to you."

"Is that really all that you recognize, beloved? In truth, none other?" he asks then in a tone very intimate and music-like.

Thus my slow reply. "Well yes, if you mean do they cause feelings in me that I recognize. That I could not honestly disown."

"Good for you, sweet Catherine, my nearly-honest Kate. For everyone—underneath what we're told we think, down below the etiquettes and fear-instilled mores—would have to recognize these images and feelings as part of their own, even part of their power for good, if accepted."

"But, Will, that's just the point. How dangerous for you to rub people's noses in what they don't want to know is there! Can you imagine your bloodthirsty critics slathering to get at you—just think of those men who value and cultivate only their reason, their pedigrees, their bleached and starched intellects, confronted with such images. They'll have you locked up for telling the truth!"

"My dear Kate," he replies, "don't you think Everyman has had the tugging experience in his youth—and prime—of being led by his penis, of thinking he's led by some lofty reasoned goal when in fact Cupid drives him where He will? Or a lovely woman does? Or even the *thought* of a lovely woman? Such are the real and powerful forces in our lives, and only count as bad when they are ruthlessly turned and spurned, forced to erupt without warning in the form of jealousy, hatred, and even war."

"Oh, Will, they'll never believe you. Who among them would want to give up the idea that the good life consists of control of appetite by the intellect? that churches rightly teach us discipline and self-control to lift ourselves out of the filth of all that is body and contrary to soul? Will, you must not risk such exposure of us. They will bury us with a vengeance! Promise me this is not a public venture or a teaching mission with you."

At that he stops to think. Once understood, even incompletely so, the urgency of being prophet in his own land recedes to a manageable level. Will is then willing to reflect. Rest before labor, as he so aptly says in the Frontispiece to *The Four Zoas.*

Inevitably the time came when Catherine was forced by inner necessity to relinquish several of her most cherished fixed ideas about herself and her role in her life with her husband. Not that she was required to inform him of all that transpired. Simply by setting them free—a bit like the penis flying blindly, with no stated goal or destination—was sufficient for unclouding her mind and turning her in a different direction. Thus she first had to admit that the few guineas she so fiercely secreted were not in fact what stood between the Blakes and starvation, the poorhouse, or debtor's prison. Rather was it unlooked-for payments, even gifts, that inevitably arrived seemingly out of nowhere just as destitution threatened.

Catherine's second idea was even more heroic than the first—more *actively* heroic in its imagining, in that it saw her taking on some kind of physical work that would contribute mightily to their well-being, afford William more work space, and somehow prove an anchor to her meandering mind and body. She was getting too old to brandish the kind of physical strength that once made her a valuable asset in her father's market garden. She was a decent seamstress; her clothing and that of her husband were sewn with care, but the face of employment in London was changing: few

were able to earn money sewing at home any more; the work was in doing some repetitive tasks in someone else's shop, small factory, even. Conditions were harsh—noisy and intrusive. How spoiled she had grown in her life with Mr Blake! she thought. How weary of fending in a world that seemed so much at odds with what they had so consistently created.

And yet, in spite of all her honest effort, loyalty, and true love, in spite of all the ways that Will had taught and encouraged her, she still hadn't faith that she would ever be truly initiated into the Paradise Will frequented. Never again would she be on real speaking terms with Will's beloved brother Robert, never could she honestly feel herself brooding under a great tree as Job, or paw the ground and snort as Behemoth. Will, ensconced in his universe, might seek her hand, might crave her presence, but in his eyes was signalled forever an absence.

In addition, Will having alienated all those people whose patronage and interests brought some particular animation to their domestic days, time had none of its expected punctuation, projects flowed into one another, and there was very little particularity that might anchor Catherine. In some ways, she felt lonelier than ever. And she began reading on her own. The words of her own known universe proliferated, began building her a tent, a sheltering tabernacle that both fed and housed her, she discovered. Reluctantly giving up her exploration of tools for teaching the blind, she encountered a thing called the circulating library, and then more than one. She read furtively in several, finally deciding on one whose offerings included all the novels Will had earlier introduced by reading aloud, one where the subscription was possible—better use for the salvific guinea saved against the most dire possibilities.

Catherine chose for herself, and pored over them. She wondered that the women—for they happened to be mostly women—were able to create such mystery, such elaborating plots in such strange environments, heroines always beset and pursued by physical and moral danger in the form of mostly undeserving (though very occasionally deserving) men, all of whose pasts were so improbably intertwined and filled with mistaken identities. Ann Radcliffe was a case in point. Her *Romance of the Forest* transported Catherine, and none of its chapters disappointed her—none of its twists and turns too improbable to lose her rapt attention.

Doors were always presenting themselves, doors within doors at the turns of long, dim corridors. Through the doors might be the paraphernalia of death, instruments of torture, bones, or else things of great beauty—worn tapestries, antique pieces of furniture, or writing tools and arcane writings that witnessed evidence of remarkable life and courage.

And how could she resist reading parts of it aloud to her husband?

I, Catherine, seated night after night by the fire, the big old beast of a cat in my lap, neither of us wanting to move a muscle for fear of disrupting the scene unfolding in the book. My eyes

sometimes ached, but still I was not tempted to abandon the adventure before me. Even William, much less engrossed than I by the reality of the plot and happenings I thought, took in what I read to him until it even made its mark on his creative life.

You have only to look at the frontispiece of *Jerusalem* to see it—the door with its sacred, imposing curve that beckons so darkly, so thoroughly in shadow and promise. And the figure approaching, the young man with the radiant lantern.

London, 1815

My Dear Catherine,

I count you a wise woman to have begun reading for your own life. By that I think I refer to the openings you make for yourself into other women's lives by reading fiction of your own choosing. Not that William does not remain your first and most dedicated teacher, also your initiator into the greatest mysteries. Within the last few months I think you have come to understand that your reading independently will not threaten him in any way. He would never relinquish that part of himself in your life any more than he would cease being lover and dearest companion. Already you can see that William benefits from your reading. Not only does the young man approach that most mysterious, beckoning door at the opening of *Jerusalem*, head cocked to one side in order to listen for clues, his right hand barely able to contain the radiating lamp low at his side. Through the door his journey propels him, and at the end he emerges, the very sun in his other hand, having shed his plain clothes for a handsomely-muscled body that dances to moon and star. So these elements from your new life enter his Imagination and emerge in new forms through his creative life.

This is an unlooked-for benefit. There are others, perhaps more obvious to you from the beginning of your independent reading. Never could Will satisfy your curiosity about people's lives—just how they live, what they think and feel. Such considerations simply do not interest him. Earlier reading that you did together, including those many years of his reading aloud to you, he enjoyed for their particular ideas, the powerful language of the writer, the craft that shone through, some noble philosophical ideas or religious beliefs of interest to him. And some writers helped him sharpen or refine his own thinking, by comparison.

The fiction you now immerse yourself in, so happily, seems a different species—so much more concerned with human lives in the first place. The way people actually live, or imagine they wish to live, then rise to great peaks of terror and confusion. Then these events sort themselves out in the most surprising and improbable ways. Think of the decade you and Will lived through before going to live in Felpham. London reeked of fear, hunger, revolutionary slogans, and broadsides,


Awake Awake Jerusalem! O lovely Emanation of Albion
Awake and overspread all Nations as in Ancient Time
For lo! the Night of Death is past and the Eternal Day
Appears upon our Hills: Awake Jerusalem and come away
So spake the Vision of Albion & in him so spake in my hearing
The Universal Father Then Albion stretchd his hand into Infinitude
And took his Bow. Fourfold the Vision for bright beaming Urizen
Layd his hand on the South & took a breathing Bow of carved Gold
Luvah his hand stretchd to the East & bare a Silver Bow bright shining
Tharmas Westward a Bow of Brass pure flaming richly wrought
Urthona Northward in thick storms a Bow of Iron terrible thundering
And the Bow is a Male & Female & the Quiver of the Arrows of Love
Are the Children of this Bow; a Bow of Mercy & Loving-kindness: laying
Open the hidden Heart in Wars of mutual Benevolence Wars of Love
And the Lapsed Man grasps form between the Male & Female Loves
And he Clothed himself in Bow & Arrows in awful state Fourfold
In the midst of his Twenty-eight Cities each with his Bow breathing

Will fairly smouldering in his attempts to stand by and behind the ever-suspect American Mr Tom Paine. At the same time he sensed his great differences of spiritual sensibility with the crowd around Joseph Johnson, and the threat to his own personal freedom.

During all that period there was for you work and then fear—just overwhelming fear—of not understanding enough, not being skilled enough at reading, writing, managing people, measuring up as Will's wife to those so much bolder and brighter females, women like Mary Wollstonecraft who travelled the wilds of London, Paris, even Scandinavia, with apparent ease. Yet when Will and his friends spoke against class and privilege, for republican ideals of equality, you hardly heard or felt it over the noise of your own fears.

As you read these works of fiction—Ann Radcliffe's in particular just now—everywhere it strikes you how much depends on one's birth and position in society—whether it is even thinkable to allow oneself to love someone, the position you will hold if a man, the marriage you will make if a woman, even the sympathies and ideals you can afford to hold. All depends on how you were born, into what level of society. Gradually you find yourself filled with gratitude for the nobility of the life you have so far followed with Will, the bold courage with which he has blazed through an unbounded world—or a world in which he refuses to see any boundaries.

I could continue to talk to you for several more pages about what is barely emerging on the horizon for you in this new venture of independent reading, but I instead choose to offer a cautionary word here. I hear you wondering, nearly aloud, whether you couldn't write such fictions as well. I hear that old, persistent voice that wishes to earn money for the Blakes in some way that would neither shame Will nor exaggerate your skills.

You need to be most honest with yourself when you are pulled this way, Catherine. It is the women writers who set your voices going, of course, because they make it all seem more possible, and they write about the subjects you so naturally are drawn to in participation and sympathy. You must keep reading, but not for the purpose of setting off that pesky old voice. Think of how long these women writers have been reading and absorbing literature—how many of them were born to fathers with huge libraries they romped through and explored from childhood, how many of them moved in intellectual circles, as young blue-stockings daring to debate freely with men their notions and ideas, how many of them now circulate their writings to friends for approval and even criticism. Then, too, think and look carefully at what they write. Underneath all the suspense and mystery, the seemingly endless twists and turns of romantic lives, the women who write them have strong opinions and ideas that they are really writing about, clothing them in adventure and romance; at base are the real opinions they value.

As you read more, you'll undoubtedly keep changing your mind, but, even so, all the while you must ask yourself—not William but your own full-grown self: if you had enough skills, what would you really *want* to be writing about? Are there ideals, philosophies you hold so dear that you could happily clothe them in fabricated lives and plots clever enough to interest general readers? Catherine, be absolutely honest with yourself about this, and with me,

Your Friend in Imagination

I began keeping a record of the novels I borrowed and read from the circulating library. I wasn't sure why, but it seemed important to do so at the time. My modest domestic duties went on as usual, and when William had a plate to pull or some other task that was part of the work habitually mine, I was happy to join in; increasingly, though, my time was spent reading and thinking; occasionally, writing.

One of the things I noticed while making the list was that all the novels I currently read were written by women. I wondered whether this was because I had simply chosen them that way, or whether there really were a lot of English women writing fiction these days. If so, it seemed one of the few trades where they made their numbers felt. Will and I had read—at least ten years before—Ann Radcliffe's popular thriller, The *Mysteries of Udolpho*. Now I read others of hers, including the *Romance of the Forest*, which I particularly enjoyed, although the twists and coincidences of the plot were a stretch to belief. What struck me most was the way the young woman—the heroine of the novel and an orphan at that—had such sharp thinking powers. She faced physical dangers bravely, with great courage and resolution, but more noteworthy to me is the way she was able to be so clearheaded and confident. She travelled all over France and chose among several suitors, accepting or rejecting them on the basis of her own desires and intuitions.

I also read books by Mary Hays and learned from Will she was a friend of Mary Wollstonecraft; he had several times met her at Joseph Johnson's. Somehow, back in those days I never was even curious about the few women who gathered at Johnson's. My main concern, as I have elsewhere admitted, was that MW might pose a threat to my happiness with Will. I assumed any woman in that crowd to be of similar nature—bold, daring, and an independent thinker. I expected the same of the women in Mary Hays's books, and was taken aback when I read her *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*. I really like her books, and the librarian told me that this one was rather personal, even autobiographical, so I was doubly curious.

The poor heroine, Emma, is besotted with love, though she is certainly an interesting woman, well read, full of sympathy, and, once again, an orphan. The kind aunt who raised Emma, on her

deathbed tells the 18-year-old to contract her wants and aspire only to rational independence. This would seem sage advice for a young woman of such agitated sensibilities; however, Emma has read and devoured Rousseau's passionate story of the love between Julie and St Preux. The story much more informs her sensibilities than do the words of the aunt. She makes a very disappointing marriage, then becomes obsessed with a love you know will never work out; and, in a sense, she loses all her independence as well, being such a slave to love.

Apparently Hays is aware that her heroine is no model to which other women might aspire. She mentions in her little introductory piece that "the errors of my heroine were the offspring of sensibility; and the result of her hazardous experiment is calculated to operate as a *warning*, rather than as an example." The character in the book with the most wisdom altogether is a Mr Francis, who people say is modelled after William Godwin, Wollstonecraft's devoted widower. At one point in the book he writes to Emma, saying, "The first lesson of enlightened reason, the great fountain of heroism and virtue, the principle by which alone man can become what man is capable of being, is *independence*." This I think about a great deal, struggling to see how it applies in my life, wondering how and whether it is at all possible to love someone deeply and still develop (or maintain, as the case may be) independence.

One of the things I so enjoy about these various women's fictions is that they make me think about my own life. They tell so much about the women's inner thoughts and feelings, rather than simply the outward processions of their lives. Instead of dwelling on events, they tell about the effects of the events on people who are quite believable—not totally good or bad, but complicated with certain strengths and weaknesses, carrying with them particular encouraging or damaging experiences.

My present reading makes me think back to a time just shortly before Will and I went to Felpham. Matthew Lewis's novel *The Monk* was causing quite a stir, and William brought it home one day as a surprise. We read it aloud to one another; I was in that stage where it was good practice as well as enjoyment for both of us. Somehow, all the women in the novel became sacrificial lambs; the men, heroes. What a *grande scandale*! I wonder now, are all non-Catholics thrilled by reading about scandal in Church and Monastery, especially at the time of the Inquisition? There are tellings within the tale as various characters recount the horrible punishments and tortures that good people go though, and in great detail. An abbot named Ambrosio, cold and harsh, suddenly finds all the fears he has squashed in himself bursting out to include every kind of atrocity, including rape. He is nearly a perfect example of Will's dictum about repressed desire. At the time, I was terribly struck and moved by the character of Agnes, a woman consigned to the convent when her intended marriage to one she loves is opposed by a cruel family. She becomes pregnant of

her beloved, which her nasty prioress discovers, and her attempts to escape the convent are foiled one after the other. Finally, she is declared dead by the prioress, who actually has her chained for life in a horrible dungeon in an obscure basement of the St Clare convent. All alone, living on only bread and water, she gives birth to her baby, who dies within a few hours. All of this is described in such agonizing detail, I couldn't help but dwell upon it, and even dream about it. In the end, I made a painting of Agnes, which Will and I brought with us as a present to Mrs Thomas Butts when we went for a farewell tea before leaving London for Felpham. Actually, I was quite pleased with it, and it served to lift all the feelings I had about poor Agnes out of a murky place in me and to arrange them on paper, which was a lovely feeling.

South Molton St
London, 1815

Dear Friend in Imagination,

William continues to make progress on the designs for the Wedgwood pattern book. I'm sure it seems to some a paltry commission, but it provides welcome income, and the pieces to be drawn are really quite lovely. William arranged to complete all the designs before undertaking any engraving, and, due to the demands of time, I contributed two designs, which were acceptable and acknowledged with pay from Mr Wedgwood. Now Will says we are sufficiently caught up, and he will do the rest of this group. Surprisingly enough, it was the sculptor, John Flaxman, our old friend, who recommended us to Josiah Wedgwood in the first place. I could have sworn we were not on good enough terms for such a transaction to have taken place, but I guess one can never be entirely sure. Perhaps it is really just Nancy Flaxman who judges Will to be so rash and unreliable, and her husband feels differently. With couples married for many years, it is nearly impossible to tease out their separate convictions.

Which is as good a way as any to begin answering your recent letter, and specifically its cautionary message. You asked me to think honestly whether I had ideals or philosophies I yearn to flesh out in characters and plots. The answer becomes clearer when I realize how many of them are really Mr Blake's. As far as large issues, my opinions are so close to those of my husband as to be practically identical with his. I know this makes the question of *independence* especially difficult to consider, but I will try to address that as well, further on. Meanwhile, I need to say that the essential identity of so many of our opinions is not surprising: Will was my first teacher and mentor. He taught me to read and write, and until recently chose what we *both* read; we early went together into

the business of making and selling prints, sharing many aspects of the work, in all of which he taught and guided me; and, when Mr Scofield made his terrible accusations, he charged both of us, as I well understood.

For the next point: For some thirty years now I've watched my husband create wonders with his hands and remarkable mind, while one after another person undervalues, misunderstands, or openly attacks both his work and his person. At the same time, it is only by dint of great self-discipline that I have been able not to dwell on or be aware of the more private whisperings and gossip that circulate about him. In truth I am much more bitter about the unjust world than my husband, but I have only recently begun enjoying the respite of being able to observe another world, a "better reality" I might describe it, whereas Will has enjoyed that world for as long as I have known him. Is it any wonder that I have grown to despair of such an unjust world being honored with the term "reality"? Perhaps my bitterness will recede as gently and inevitably as a sea tide, when I am more at ease with what is still so new to me and less dependent on the world that is so rigid, so cruel and commercial.

I see we are back at the vexed question about dependence and independence, for it is independence that wise writers like Mary Hays, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Ann Radcliffe deem the most important ingredient for elevating women to an equal thinking status. As far as women's education is concerned, there is not a single doubt in my mind that these women are correct in their prescription. Had the ability to read and write and unlimited access to books been mine by birthright, I would today be a far different woman, and I have no doubt this is true of thousands of other women in these lands. On the other hand, true independence has been horribly difficult for William to achieve, and he a man, with some degree of early education and apprenticeship, plus exposure to all the fine arts a city like London affords. Is it crass of me to think of independence in a less philosophic way, to point out how much easier independence is to achieve for man or woman when money is inherited, some amount that is guaranteed, some security so that any brave decision, unusual product, or public statement would not jeopardize a person's livelihood?

I have heard tell that some of the women writers whose fictions I've read have *not* been independently wealthy, that their writing has sustained their lives, in some cases even helped to support other family members. Of them, I can only stand in awe and give thanks. They have skills and a particular kind of courage I will never have. What I can and will do is what I have already begun: record bits and pieces of the life William chose from the beginning, I joined and never relinquished, which seems to me somehow different from any of the lives I hear or even read about. There is a way in which William has achieved a *remarkable* independence, meaning independence from the opinions of others, from their approval. He still works constantly, and with ever-increasing joy, in

the way he understands he should go. That is something I don't know others to have achieved. In addition, I am beginning to sense some independence of thought in myself, perhaps inappropriate to a woman of my age, but noteworthy and still tender and delicate to me, urging me to more reading and reflection, even for no apparent reason.

Finally, there is a kind of interdependence the two of us share that I sense is rare and worth noting. Largely unspoken, perhaps, but born of deep understanding and sharp listening to one another over many years. I think back to the jealousies and impatiences I felt at one time and wonder just how they disappeared, and what ever happened to them. Perhaps the key is in the other reality that Will has so long urged me towards and which now proceeds to fill my eyes and other senses at unexpected times.

Thank you earnestly for pressing me to think about these things.

Catherine Blake

Catherine, you earlier mentioned having read Letters Written in Sweden, Norway and Denmark *by Mary Wollstonecraft.*

Yes, I read it some years after her death and found it very engaging.

Just what was it about the book that held you so?

Well first of all, I found it so very balanced. You remember I did not feel the same way about her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Either it was too philosophical, too reasoned in its progressing from thought to thought, or the words too hard. By hard I do not mean difficult reading; that no longer daunts me. No, I mean the words she employs to build her arguments are hard in the way of harsh and unfeeling. Nothing in them appeals to a person's sensory faculties. It discourages me from going forward in the book, even though I believe myself to be in sympathy with her beliefs about the importance of women's education—its importance to society as a whole, not merely to women.

But wait, Catherine, you were talking about the balance she achieved in the Letters *book. Would you say, then, it is a balance between reason and sensibility?*

No, I don't think that's the way I would describe it. First of all, the form itself is captivating; that is, the use of letters intended for someone in particular. Many other writers nowadays, and also in earlier times, have cast their writings in letters, but the reader is not convinced, not really drawn in. I think of the letters that frame Mary Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*, for example. Woe to the recipient! They are relentless in demanding attention and sympathy—no, more than sympa-

thy, I think. More like pity for the wronged heroine. Wollstonecraft's letters I believe were actually intended for, if not sent to, her negligent American lover, Gilbert Imlay, whose business she was attending as the purpose of her travels. Lucky fellow! Who would not relish the receipt of such letters, filled as they are with exacting descriptions of the trees, rock formations, all the special beauties of each place she stayed on her journey. She tells us what and when they ate, what kinds of military service were required of the men, attitudes of privileged people towards servants, how men and women treated one another, and the way they overdressed (and under-cleaned) their children. In short, she utilizes marvelously a balanced blend of her faculties in the writing.

What about the author of these letters? Do you think the reader gets a clear picture of her?

Strangely, yes. I think so. Here is Wollstonecraft looking not at herself, not imagining some maudlin, long-suffering woman enduring what are probably very largely her own sufferings. Here she examines a world very different from either the England that is her home or the tumultuous France she knows so well. She applies her truly remarkable intelligence to ferreting out truths about peoples she knows only from some factual reportage of past wars or royal dynastic history. All the while this woman has with her the infant born of herself and Imlay, she is transacting the most delicate of business investigations for him, and doesn't speak a word of either Danish or Swedish as she sets out. So we know more about her from what she chooses to note and describe for us than if she had given us her whole personal history and biography.

Catherine, what if I were to ask you to compare Wollstonecraft, as a writer, to your husband—his poetry and prophecy, for example? What would you say? Could you comment on that?

That would be a terribly difficult task for me. You know how deeply I love my husband and how I revere his genius—in a way that the rest of the world is blinded to, I might add. My opinion could scarcely be considered objective. Actually, that may be true to some extent about Wollstonecraft as well. The course of her life rubbed against mine early in our marriage in a way that may still affect my reading of her work.

Supposing we take that as a given, as a caveat. I'm still very interested in what you'd have to say on the subject. Be informal about it, and see what comes to mind.

I could start by talking a bit about the ways in which I think their writings are similar, before I point out some enormous differences between them.

Whatever you wish. Begin anywhere.

It is especially difficult because Mary Wollstonecraft is no longer here to defend herself or correct my thoughts, but I believe both of them have a deep desire to change people through their

writings, to make people sit up and ask questions about the way most human beings think and act, or, rather act without really thinking. They both have received some terribly harsh and very public criticism for their works—Will especially, over the last ten or fifteen years. In Wollstonecraft's case, I think of the particularly ugly satire that the Reverend Polwhele wrote in response to her *Vindication*, spearheading a host of angry men, and women as well, to attempt to degrade her ideas about women's need for education and independence. Neither Will nor Mary allowed themselves to be intimidated by bad reviews, and I think showed a great deal of courage in continuing to defend their beliefs.

That seems fair enough. Now what about the differences in their writings?

But I am not quite finished with what they have in common. I think they both have prophetic voices. In Will's case, I think people simply don't *understand* his prophetic voice. In Wollstonecraft's, they can *understand* what she is proposing, but most of them don't *like* it and will fight against it as long as they have the breath to do so. In Will's case, it is simply easier to brand him a madman. That way they can dismiss his work with impunity.

Now to the differences.

To begin with, I would propose that Wollstonecraft lives very much in her body and looks for the answers to human dilemmas within history. She was something of an adventuress by nature, and her deep concern for republicanism took her to Paris to observe first hand the violent twists and turns of those historical events. When in Scandinavia, she noted the relations between church and state, the economic arrangements within the society, what she sees as the "natural independence" of the Norwegian people, as well as the beauty of the landscape. She was convinced that the world would benefit if women were educated and expected to participate as equals in society. Will, of course, lives elsewhere; that is, he lives mainly in his head. His work is generated entirely from his Imagination, and I doubt very much that he believes that social or historical change is at the base of all progress, even though his political sympathies have always lain with republicanism and the equality of people. He is also deeply religious in a way that is rarely appreciated. In order to understand, much less follow, his prophetic books, one needs a thoroughgoing knowledge of both Old and New Testaments, and a mind so open to his own revelations as to see through all the cant and punishing doctrine that churches have promulgated for hundreds of years. It is a daunting task that Will requires of a reader, but no more so than what he requires of himself. As for solutions, the improvement of humanity, I believe my husband looks less to history or historical change than to the possibility that each person would develop the faculty for contemplation. I suppose he would really like to see everyone become a mystic, a visionary. In fact I think he said that directly

when he was writing a Preface for *Milton*—Would to God that all the Lord's people were Prophets—he was quoting from the Old Testament. You can see from this that Will and Mary would very likely not agree on the nature of reality—Will having found something he finds so much more powerful, so much more comprehensive than what people think of as historical reality, and which he is convinced is available to all who truly desire it.

But, Catherine, if Mr Blake's visual art springs from his Imagination, why are his figures so bodily and muscular? And if he lives mainly in his head, how do you account for his great desire for your own body, which you readily admit was an important part of your long married relationship?

That's complicated and difficult to explain; still, I'd like to try, starting with your first question. I sometimes think of Will's Imagination as a massive, hungry receptacle, desirous from his earliest days of all things beautiful, awesome, out of the ordinary. Such things might be antique statuary in a cathedral, a bug or butterfly lighting on a flower, a human being running for his life, or a band of angels perched in a tree. It's not at all the case that Will doesn't look carefully at things; his visual perception is very keen. It's simply that all these particular things lodge in his Imagination, and from there he retrieves them as he draws and paints. As to the muscularity of bodies, even their frequent nakedness, you might say that Mr Blake's people are embodied energy. He loves to show movement and yearning as expressed in the body. If you think of Michel Angelo's people, they are also muscular and beautiful, and their clothing more designed to reveal than to cover their bodies, and to show the ways that they move. You know that my husband greatly admired Michel Angelo. I don't know, but I'd be very curious to know if he worked in a way similar to my husband's, with an Imagination terribly hungry to be fed. As to the second question, again I think Will's keen visual perception was an important component of his appreciation. No doubt he saw in me an instance of some of the things he most admired about the human female body—certain curves and proportions, a particularity of the way the female torso rotates from the pelvis, and a multitude of sights of erotic possibility for movement and sensation. In addition, the idea of embodied energy is important here as before, in the first question. The actual exchange of our two embodied energies was terribly exciting to Will; for him, sensual energy was never separate from creative energy, which we both know he held sacred. Wasn't it William Shakespeare who said, "One touch of nature makes the whole world kin!"?

It is the first of May, they are both in good health and walking, walking at a leisurely pace, but purposefully, to celebrate the blooms that are everywhere. Even while they are still in the City, before they reach the countryside blessings of the Heath, blossoms poke out of the edges of walls

and footworn paths. They cover a few miles; soon the lavish colours of early poppies, translucent in the spring sunshine, greet them in large clumps, and William salutes them by tipping his broad-brimmed black hat. Catherine wears a bright kerchief, her once-dark curls escaping both in front and back. The lightness of the threads of grey are not unbecoming to her face, and William views her with fond appreciation.

"Good woman," he booms from his barrel chest, "you are still such a treat for my eyes after all these years. I wonder if you really know that?"

"You mean that I please you or that you find me well-preserved for my years?" she quips, colouring at the neck.

Without breaking his stride, Will leans a bit to her side, turns his torso and runs his two hands from her waist down along her hips. "It's those curved lines I so admire, always have, and let's sing as we go."

"Even though we don't really know where we're going?"

"*Especially* as we don't really know where we're going!" And she sees his face break into one of those wide grins that he reserves for playful times with her.

"What will it be?"

He thinks for a bit, then, "Well, since we're skirting around the issue of aging, let's try some of *Innocence* and *Experience* for a while. You choose."

Catherine, as ever preferring the gentle songs of *Innocence* to the more harrowing lyrics of *Experience*, thinks of the prints, of the mushroomy tree she so loves and begins with "The Echoing Green." She sings

The Sun does arise,
And make happy the skies.
The merry bells ring
To welcome the Spring.
The sky-lark and thrush,
The birds of the bush,
Sing louder around,
To the bells' cheerful sound.
While our sports shall be seen
On the Echoing Green.

Old *Will* with white hair
Does laugh away care,
Sitting under the oak,
Among the old folk.

"Your turn next," she directs, pleased with herself for remembering well, both words and tune.

William chooses, surprising her that he stays with *Innocence*, the song about "The Chimney Sweeper" that begins

> When my mother died I was very young,
> And my father sold me while yet my tongue
> Could scarcely cry weep weep weep,
> So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.
>
> There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head
> That curl'd like a lambs back, was shav'd, so I said,
> Hush Tom, never mind it, for when your head's bare,
> You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair.

and ends with the dream of the Angel and the promise to the boy about God as the father. Back and forth go the two of them, singing and remembering all that the lyrics can mean, all that their lives were about as they pulled and coloured the plates. Eventually Will sings the other song about "The Chimney Sweeper," the one from the *Experience* group that ends as the poor young sweep cries of his parents

> And because I am happy, & dance & sing,
> They think they have done me no injury:
> And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King
> Who make up a heaven of our misery.

Her spirit somewhat chastened by his sad song, Catherine decides she is hungry, and they find a welcoming stretch of green bordered by a stream, on which to eat the little picnic she has prepared. It is mostly bread and cheese, with some fresh strawberries bought from a costermonger en route. They eat without speaking, simply filling their eyes with what is all around them. Will, his hat removed, stretches out on his back. Catherine follows suit, resting her head on his belly so his deep, rhythmic breathing lulls her like the regular movement of a cradle. They nap briefly, then wake, Will still hearing songs in his head. The basket is empty of food. Before heading back, Catherine wets a cloth napkin to wrap the stems of flowers they now choose and pick, placing them within the basket, hopeful its shade will help them to survive the trip back to the rooms on South Molton Street.

It is still warm in the late afternoon light as they re-enter the crowded streets of London. Suddenly they see two, then three, and then many of the sooty sweeps of the City dancing in the streets. It is their jubilee they are celebrating, and they scamper from door to door, begging and receiving bits of money from the householders and shopkeepers who depend on their regular

services. Their faces are smeared with soot just as usual, but today their hair is powdered and covered with wreaths of fantastically bright colors. They wear shiny gilt jackets made of paper, and even the Hackney coachmen sport coloured ribbons in their hats in honor of the sweepers. Crowning the celebration will be a dinner at Paddington, afforded by the terms of the will of Lady Montague, whose son had disappeared, was believed lost to her, and subsequently was found apprenticed to a sweep.

Will has been humming all the while they are watching, suddenly stops and says, "Kate, we neglected the other chimney-sweeper in *Experience*. I knew we had forgotten something. He's in the "London" song.

As they continue towards home, he sings it, loud and quite fierce, not caring at all for the occasional stare of those who pass.

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infant's cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
Every blackning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlot's curse
Blasts the new-born Infant's tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

"Good God, Will, those were such terrible, horrible times in London," says Kate, pulling her husband urgently to a stop and out of the line of the people. "The fear and agitation here, the endless bloody killings in Paris, the hunger in London, it just went on and on for years."

"And so it does still, my dear, those pathetically poor people of London who survive on gin alone, those pitiful men, and women, who walk about and live their lives as if manacled, slaves of their own thinking and ideas, the diseases passed along by a throng of prostitutes to men who pass it to their wives and infect their babies not yet in the cradle."

"Ah, Will, admit that those were even worse times, those times when you were writing these songs. Admit that we two are happier now, less fearful, more deeply satisfied with who we are and how we live, regardless of what goes on around us."

"You're right, Kate; I solemnly swear that you're right; I recall in those times being sure I would be dead in five years, if not in one. Now see what a mellow old man I'm becoming."

And they were home.

Suddenly Will and I are engaged in a flurry of work. Not surprisingly, he is in high spirits, singing and whistling as we go about printing plates, which mostly I pull and hang carefully to dry. Among them are *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, still my very favourites after these many years. I am struck more than ever this time by the subtle differences achieved by Will's masterful control in inking the plates. Of course the hand-colouring, at the end, makes for the most obvious and dramatic differences, but I am amazed at the effects Will can achieve with the inking itself. This time he uses an unusual reddish-brown ink that has the effect of enriching the overall print. I like what results when we do the final colouring—how the inked lines interact with the shades of paint we use.

I naturally wonder how we will sell all these copies, but for once I keep my worries to myself so as not to throttle the work we are about. (Perhaps I've not mentioned that over the last few years I've figured out a way to unvoice my fears about basic expenses. For example, when money for food is really come to an end, I simply serve our meal with clean, empty plates, maintaining as best I can an attitude of good cheer. Will then picks up the message, and unpaid monies are collected or unexpected jobs materialize. In addition, I know that certain men have been more or less regular contributors to our well-being from time to time, and for that I am eternally grateful. Even though Will practices frugal measures like cutting the backs of plates, new supplies of paper, ink, and water-colours are necessities for the project we have at hand.) In this case, at least one copy of the *Songs* is already spoken for by Mr Tulk, and I try to take that as an auspicious sign.

Both of us like Tulk and admire his good social conscience. It wasn't long before we discovered his abiding interest in Swedenborg. Strangely enough, we have figured out that we may very well have seen him first at that long-ago meeting of the New Church we attended early in our marriage, because his parents attended the same meeting. At the time he was just a youngster, being scarcely more than thirty at the present. Not that he is active as a participant in the New Church now. Like us, he discovered as a young man the evils of sectarianism, and he appreciates his Swedenborg as a thinker and reader, not as a churchgoer. At any rate, he also appreciates the illuminated books we've produced, and has the funds to acquire art.

Once we had each achieved our 60th birthdays and moved on, I found us very differently situated—not financially, which I finally see is unlikely ever to change, but in bringing to a close what had stretched to more than a whole decade of isolation, in both work and life. Within just a few short years, we were surrounded by a group of young men who were like a litter of affectionate pups to Will, tagging him and eager for his company, dropping in for visits with us and escorting Will to a whole variety of activities where they sought his opinion.

The new phase of our life—the sweetening of Will's old age, I like to think of it—really had its beginning in the person of John Linnell. I'm sure he was in no more than his mid-twenties when he first visited us at South Molton Street, and the young pups he brought along later were, several of them, still in their teens. In his twenties John was not just a beginner in his art. He had already studied for some years and was an accomplished painter, primarily a water-colourist.

From the first there was deep understanding between young Linnell and my husband. We quickly discovered that, like us, our young friend shared strong likes and dislikes in art. And like Will, he revered Michel Angelo and Dürer. His collection of engravings, which I viewed when Will and I were at tea with the Linnells, husband and wife, was truly remarkable. Will spent hours and hours contemplating those engravings, for he was a frequent visitor at the Linnell's. I even think that the presence of young John's fine collection made it easier for Will to sell his own a few years later, when necessity pressed us still further. For a few years, the two of them kept constant company whenever neither was working. During the day they might visit galleries. In the evening John sometimes took him to theatre, opera, favourite singers' recitals; or they simply enjoyed one another's company.

Sunday evenings Will dined regularly with the Linnells during that early period of their friendship, but the majority of the evening visits were with us—first at South Molton Street and later at Fountain Court when we moved. In fact I credit those visits with learning a great deal about my husband's early life. Not that Will had ever withheld things from me; more simply, he gradually unlayered himself for John Linnell.

Back he went, to his days as apprentice to Basirer, and even further, to the period of day-long sketching in the dank recesses of Westminster Abbey—always with rich commentary on the meanings each of these experiences revealed to him. Mostly I listened, allowing these tellings to flesh out the events I had already recorded in short snatches. On occasion I chimed in, surprised at the degree of my own anger, for instance when recalling the events of our last month at Felpham. I could hear my voice shake with it, and I had to get up from my chair to walk the anger out of my body in the telling. The two men were respectful listeners, neither of them making any attempt to quiet or calm me until my story was spent.

Still, the majority of the talk was about art, art and the spirit; the conversation wasn't always serious, either. The two of them would regale me with bits and pieces from the Drury Lane production they'd endured (if it was worth the imitation) or descriptions of pretentious people looking to invest excessive pounds at a gallery. John brought us his work as he finished it, hopeful for Will's thoughtful criticism, and of course we went through all the pulls from the illuminated books we had recently reprinted. We compared the effects of different water-colourings on various pulls, and Will asked young Linnell to guess which sets I had coloured and which were his own. This was, I'm certain, for my enjoyment, since it seemed so obvious to me which was which.

Of course John was a fervent believer in painting from nature, and the two of them departed radically on that issue, Will, as I've said, painting only from his Imagination; still, he was most respectful of John's work and the *way* he worked. Talk of the spirit was a different matter. We did it less and less; invariably, one way or the other, Mr Linnell was offended, considered our ideas and beliefs not only incorrect and radical but somehow even injurious to his sensibilities. Had we simply been orthodox Dissenters it would not have been so bad. He told us early on that he had not many years ago become a Baptist convert, which resulted in a combination of enthusiasm and conservatism that I found difficult to reconcile. Will and I agreed to skirt any debates about mind and body, spirit and matter, the sacredness of physical love—those many things we knew to ruffle his received religious convictions.

The reason I credit John Linnell with ushering in the last, and in many ways the sweetest, phase of our joined life is that he so believed in William Blake—in the way his particular genius drove his fine technical abilities and in the unquestionable sanity of his mind—as to introduce him again and again to those he knew would profit from it. Some of these people commissioned work, some drew him out in directions surprising even to me, and some were the young pups I've mentioned who simply appreciated and loved him as though they were the favoured sons and he the aging, cherished father.

One thing I should mention, before going into the blessings of Will's last years, is an aspect of John Linnell at first quite mysterious to me. He is a man whose worries about money are actively working on him at all times. I write this in full knowledge that money is not a thing people write about, perhaps do not even like to read about, for I notice it is never discussed in any of the novels I dote upon, regardless of whether authors or characters are of middle or upper class. Rather, it is surmised from such things as clothing, travel, entertainment (or lack thereof), but never spelled out. I gather it is not considered seemly, or polite, to discuss money, except in the absolute necessity of pure business transaction.

Yet the point I wish to make about Linnell—who has contributed immeasurably to our livelihood over a score of years, to be sure—is yet a further step from the ban on the discussion of the subject. That is a person's *attitude* towards money, the hold it has over his life. In the case of someone like my Will, I daresay his attitude would not have been altered had we been beneficiaries of inheritance, or royalties, or substantial pecuniary prizes. To his way of thinking, certain books and art supplies are desirable, need to be purchased. If money is not available, other ways and means must be found. His other thought: People should be paid for the honest labour they perform. Further thoughts about money, for instance fretful worries or regular, itemized reckonings, are a waste of creative thinking time.

On the other hand, Will was never willing to waste time bargaining either. When he set a price upon a work of art he had completed, he never brooked discussion. Either we sold it or it stayed with us. And this is precisely the area where we have had differences with Mr Linnell, whose care for and generosity towards both of us is unquestionable. Nevertheless, his worries about money are everpresent. Partially this may be due to his having a wife and children to fret over, their futures to ensure. So, strangely hand in glove with his generosity is a certain parsimoniousness that has reared its head in surprising ways—ways that I wouldn't have thought to expect when first we met.

At that time, our impression was simply that young John had taken it upon himself to introduce us to all his favourite friends, in the expectation that they would value our special qualities, appreciate the dedication of our lives to art, and—not to be underestimated—that such connections might also lead to the sale of completed work, or commissions for new ones. And much of this actually transpired, in one form or another. The remarkable thing about it is just how much of it was generated in high spirits all around.

For example, John introduced us to a friend who was his very first painting teacher, a Mr John Varley by name. I believe John Varley had the most rollicking high spirits of any man I have ever met, with a varied selection of interests to match. He wrote and had published books whose topics ranged from principles of landscape design, which informed his painting, to zodiacal physiognomy, which grew out of his long practice with horoscopes and astrology. All his daily activities were guided by the complex calculations he figured on a regular schedule. He even cast an astrological chart for Will at one point, called a nativity, which was published in a magazine and apparently gave convincing astrological evidence of my husband's mystical gifts and extraordinary mind.

Mr Varley was an enormous man, who towered over Will and me and must have weighed over fifteen stone. His energy was also towering, so on the occasions that he and Will were together I always felt our two rooms would burst with it, that furnishings might go flying out the windows if they laughed at the same time, especially when they were both obviously concentrating on the same

matter at hand. Another evidence of John Varley's robust physical energy I never myself saw, but Will reported to me from his visits to the studio. Coming on now in popularity is a sport made out of the natural tendency some men have to encounter each other in fist fights. This was another regular practice for Varley, coaxing out a lot of his extra energy no doubt. Apparently he also encourages his students in the sport, for much the same reason. Will tells me there is some way the fists are first wrapped to soften the blows, and there are prescribed maneuvers that people learn to do that increase their skill. Will and I have even heard, though never directly observed it, that when Mr Varley's students need further recreational breaks from their work, he has them line up on either side of his long dining table and toss his wife—who is as tiny as he is enormous—back and forth between them. If you were to meet him, you could well believe such a story.

Mostly, though, the two men, Will and John Varley, developed together a series of visits that stretched themselves into the morning hours. Aided and abetted by his new friend, Will was able, given time and patience, to envision a whole parade of heads with faces of famous personages from bygone days. These he would capture in quick drawings on paper, keeping a running commentary as he did so. Biblical, classical, royal-historical, the characters came at random, much to Varley's delight. It is not that my husband did not have such experiences at our home, or that he failed to record them in his notebook with drawing implements, but these meetings in the dark at the studio in Great Titchfield Street produced the most dramatic examples, and such an abundance as to be remarkable.

Even in Fountain Court, our final roost, and where we felt ourselves to be so much older and wiser, there were thunderous days, Will storming about the two rooms like a caged she-bear whose young had been threatened. First would arrive a devastating report about work William had recently submitted. What comes immediately to mind are the illustrations for Linnell's old friend, a Dr Robert John Thornton, physician as well as friend to John Linnell.

Dr Thornton fancies himself something of an expert in the education of the young as well as in botany and medicine. In the capacity of educator, he had published various books intended for use in schools, including one with Virgil's poetry. At first the Virgil was published as plain, naked words. Woodcut illustrations were published separately a few years afterwards; then, still later, the two together. Not surprisingly, the illustrated edition was the most popular one, inspiring the good doctor to produce yet another edition, which was to include still more illustrations. By this time, Dr Thornton and my husband were acquainted, and Will was to be responsible for designing and engraving some twenty illustrations as part of the two planned volumes. Together, according to my records, they were advertised as *The Pastorals of Virgil, with a Course of English Reading, Adapted for*

Schools: in which all The Proper Facilities are given, enabling youth to acquire The Latin Language in the Shortest Period of Time. Illustrated by 230 Engravings.

Many of these illustrations were not new. They had been included in earlier editions, engraved in wood by a host of popular English wood-engravers. Will was responsible mainly for the part which presents Virgil's First Eclogue, freely imitated in English by one of our now rather dated poets, a man named Ambrose Philips. Since the Latin First Eclogue is given in the volume, though quite without illustration, the pedagogical idea behind it all is that the student be encouraged to translate Mr Philips's English version to a Latin rendering, which can then be checked against Virgil's original. Will, whose Latin is good and therefore leaves him not entirely dependent upon Mr Philips for the details of the dialogue between the two shepherds, called in English Colinet and Thenot, set to work immediately. Once again he put his *Job* to the side and, within a remarkably short interval, had filled a small sketchbook—for the illustrations were intended to be small, arranged four to each page—with pencil drawings, lightly washed in sepia. I find them charming, some of them even sprightly, the pastoral countryside putting me in mind of Felpham, through the lens of WB.

Having completed the designs, Will then turned to engraving the little wood-blocks. The fact that he had not beforehand worked in wood was no impediment. He clearly envisaged what he wished to achieve. His method was not that different from what he had worked on a pewter plate during our first days at Felpham. And, importantly, he had excellent tools for the job—gravers precise and capable of the fine lines he was after.

I challenge anyone to view these miniature scenes unmoved. In fact, taken as a whole, they are probably my very most favourite. Lit by what appears part silver moonlight, part sparkling sunlight, all shimmer with radiance. In every scene, each particular element moves, whether it be tree, stream, sky, youth, or old man. In a few, the force of Nature is extreme and fierce; that of a Creator, stronger still: some moving hand sweeps the scene.

My personal bias revealed, let me return to the actual course of events as they occurred in turn. Mutilation came about when it was decided that the engravings were not well accommodated arranged four to a page as planned, and so the finished blocks themselves were sawed and shaven, such that a bough here, a slice of sky there, was sacrificed. Will complied gracefully in this solution; I, far more perturbed than he.

The next thing that resulted from Dr Thornton's viewing of our first proofs—and we were not to learn the whole story with all its details until later—was his being thrown into doubt about William's abilities as an engraver. Having approved the pastoral delicacy of the initial drawings, he judged the engravings rough, even "amateurish." He then conceived a plan to have all of my husband's designs recut by a "professional wood-engraver," perhaps even more than one, who knows?—which

plan he promptly set in motion. The results are seen in three of the published illustrations. They are immediately identifiable by their flatness, and the stereotyped rendering of the sea, its sailing ships and gulls. Fortunately for all of us, this plan was interrupted by a timely dinner party, a gathering where Linnell and other artists who were present praised the merits of WB's wood-engravings. This caused Thornton to abandon the recutting, leaving only the three I have mentioned to alter the visionary effect of the whole. (A fourth had been completed but was dropped. Happily it did not replace Will's, for in it a dead sun is pasted in a flat sky, and the elderly shepherd, supposedly wise and ecstatic, appears to be haranguing young Colinet with a boring moral.)

During the interval in which all of this was brewing, a storm quite naturally blew through our lodgings. Will ranted and vented righteous anger.

"The doctors, Kate, the doctors!" he shouted, filling our two rooms with the resonance of a cathedral organ, his barreled chest pumping like a bellows fueling the instrument to its fullest. "Doctors of medicine, doctors of philosophy, doctors of theology, all with their tight buttocks and narrow little minds. Remember the Reverend Dr Trusler, that poor pathetic clergyman out of kilter with the Spirit and too blind to see what Malevolence might honestly look like? Ah, Kate, what I wouldn't give to line them all up, personally bash their heads together—no, better yet—pry each head open, toughen each brain with a dose of reality, then insert a dose of courage and open their eyes so for once they glimpse what's true instead of just cowering."

"But Will, you mustn't even say it aloud."

"Damn it, woman, if I can't say it to you, I shall burst. What do you take me for? Of course I wouldn't even waste these words on such fools as they. But if I can't be honest with you who are my beloved, it means you'll not ever know my true feelings, and I'll be forced to withhold all unpleasant thoughts from you forever more. Would you really choose that path?"

"You know I wouldn't. It is only my fear that spoke and is so cowardly, my fear to see that here is someone who can hurt you once again."

"Then put away the fear," he says, his fury beginning to subside, "for there is nothing anyone can do or say can hurt me any more. I can only do the work that comes through my Imagination, and, if it is not understood, so be it. I shall be like a good monk who prays his offices, sings all his parts whether or not anyone on earth hears. Doing them—singing them—they have existence, and the rest should be none of my concern. Only that you, Kate, not mistake my intention."

Thus did he comfort me, along with his own confession, and comforted too with soft strokings and kisses whispered between us so that our whole selves with bodies, minds, and spirits were in deep accord.

One could hope to record that such was the amicable end to the whole Virgil episode in our lives, but it was not to be. When finally we saw a copy of the volume, saw it sewn and bound, there, directly under Will's glorious frontispiece engraving, perfectly setting the scene and manifesting the character of each shepherd, Dr Thornton had printed in regular type the following:

> *The Illustrations of this English Pastoral are by the famous BLAKE, the illustrator of Young's* Night Thoughts, *and Blair's* Grave*; who designed and engraved them himself. This is mentioned, as they display less of art than genius, & are much admired by some eminent painters.*

The person most admiring of Will's wood-engravings for Dr Thornton's Virgil was young Samuel Palmer. Samuel was one of those pups I mentioned, in fact looking very much like a young pup when John Linnell first brought him round. I'm sure he was less than twenty at the time and even smaller than Will and I. Something about him was a bit elfin-like as he approached my husband, who was bedridden at the time, and shyly telling us how he approached his own art work with a great deal of fear and trembling, which immediately won Will's hearty approval. At the time he was working on the series of water-colours for Dante's *Divine Comedy* that Linnell had commissioned, and, as he turned to put his paper and brush aside, Samuel begged to have a closer look at the work.

Peering through his spectacles—for he was extremely short-sighted and needed to wear them constantly—he looked long and from many different angles, erupting little spurts of amazed cheepings from time to time. Just as suddenly he stopped, pulled off the spectacles and said, "But, sir, you're ill, and what ails you?"

"Just the old foot that I burned, actually scalded I suppose I should say, and then insisted on using regardless for walking."

"But how did you scald it?"

"Pure foolishness, my own foolishness and distraction. Not even worth repeating. Kate now has me strapped to the bed, the foot dressed and resting in a position that allows me to work. You thus find me a happy man."

With these assurances received, Samuel then presented us with a packet of green tea which he declared to be his favourite and a good stimulant for art work. As I returned with the tea tray and cups for us all, I heard the young man declaring his enchantment with Will's wood-engravings for Thornton's *Virgil*. He spoke of them as visions of little dells and nooks and corners of Paradise.

Then he said, "I can't even find the right words to describe them. They all seem to draw aside the fleshly curtain to reveal a mystic and dreamy glimmer that penetrates and kindles the inmost soul, giving complete and unreserved delight, unlike the gaudy daylight of this world."

Now it was our turn to be enchanted. Before young Palmer left that day, Will had told him the whole story of the genesis of the wood-engravings, all of the convolutions, slights, and irritations sounding like just so many hilarious misadventures, and bringing tears of laughter to everybody's eyes. Will then insisted on giving Samuel a parting present of one of the proof pages of the little wood-engravings he so admired.

"And you'll note," said Will, his finger pointing in the air like an Old Testament prophet, "these retain their organic dimensions. They are pristine and unravished. No knives or saws have been at these four; and they rest boldly snuggling together on a single page."

So Palmer was nearly dancing with joy as he and John Linnell went out the door. They had already made a date for a next visit, and Will promised to pay a visit to Samuel's work space once he was comfortably up and about.

Even now I recall how it cheered me to feel the magnetism Will held for the several young artists who befriended us late in our lives. They sensed right away the spiritual nature from which all his work springs, no matter what the subject might be. Not too long after young Palmer began visiting us, he wrote that he had come to understand genius as the unreserved devotion of the whole soul to the divine, which couldn't better describe my lifelong partner. And yet Will was never as formally religious as these youngsters seemed to be, not a churchgoer at all as I've said before, not any more than I was. He rather enjoyed tweaking them a bit with his open lightheartedness about the spirit that moved us.

I am reminded of one of the first times George Richmond came to our house. He was the youngest of all, not sixteen when we met him, but, like the others, earnestly devoted to the idea of becoming a good artist and practising regularly. He began keeping a sketching book that he wanted

to show us, hoping for encouragement from Will. One day, early on, we were just sitting down to tea when George arrived, looking forlorn and dejected.

"Young man," said Will once we had found a chair for him and fetched a cup for his tea, "I've never seen you look so downhearted—two inches shorter, bowed down with your nose about to scrape our table. Whatever is bothering you?"

"I have no hope," said young George, nearly whimpering with remorse. "For a fortnight I have been entirely deserted by the powers of invention."

My husband turned immediately to me with a twinkle in his eye but a look of intense sympathy at his mouth. "It is just so with us, is it not, for weeks together when the visions forsake us? What do we do then, Kate?"

Without a moment's hesitation I answered, "We kneel down and pray, Mr Blake."

It was often like that with the young men. For me, the fun was very pure, as if they were our children to play with, without the responsibilities. It was not quite so carefree for Will, for it was clear from the work they were producing that they were very much under his influence artistically. That was always a serious matter for him, a moral issue. When young Richmond produced his copper engraving he called *The Shepherd* a few years later, we could see just how much of Will he had learned. The wonderfully

human form of his shepherd figure, at the same time deeply religious as a subject, stretched through WB back to Michel Angelo. Never mind that George had studied for years at the Royal Academy. It appeared he would not follow in his natural father's footsteps as a portrait painter.

Edward Calvert was quite a different person, older and more formed than George Richmond, at least in his twenties when we met; it was during the same period that we met young George. Edward Calvert was a young man of some experience, having traveled as a seaman to Greece where he fell in love with the beauties of antique sculpture. Like Palmer, he was fascinated with my husband's tiny wood-engravings for the Virgil and spent hours comparing earlier and later stages of the pulls. He too loved working in miniature, and early on brought us his little water-colour which he called *A Primitive City*. It is such a tiny painting, the city filled with all kinds of mystery and sinuous trees, a meandering stream, and a tall woman looking at us over her shoulder and beckoning us farther into the scene with the towel she is using to dry her body.

Calvert also admired and bought from us an especially beautifully hand-coloured copy of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, fascinated with the whole idea of our illuminated books. He plied Will with questions about the wood-engravings, though, since that's what he was working on at the time we met Edward. I also sensed that he was very observant of the relationship that Will and I enjoyed. None of the young pups (not counting John Linnell, who brought most of them around to meet us) was married, or even seriously courting at the time, but they were certainly admirers of physical beauty. Of all of them, I think Edward Calvert was most admiring of women, and he was clearly thinking and imagining what a relationship with a wife should be. Ideally beautiful women frequent his artwork; clearly they had his undivided attention.

Frequently Edward asked *me* lots of questions as well—how I felt about living with an artist, how it was for me to work with the press, what Will had taught me about colours. He was terribly curious about our lives and what he wished for his own. He had gone away to sea early on, at fifteen I think, shortly after his father died, and so lived in the company only of men for those several years he spent at sea. Young Edward had witnessed many terrible battles, including the famous battle at Algiers in 1816. He described the seemingly endless bombardment and ruin of the

city that went on for at least eight hours. He told me then about his closest friend, Midshipman Jardine, who didn't endure the battle, but was killed by a cannonball as he was positioned just next to Edward. Clearly, the experience had been a great tragedy for young Calvert.

What saved him stemmed from a much earlier experience in his life, which he also described to me in some detail. According to the story he told, it happened when he was only five or six years old, at a time he was visiting his maternal grandmother, a woman who spent a considerable portion of her wealth and energy on creating a garden of great enchantment. According to Edward, the shades and hues of colour in the garden were never-ending in their variety; in addition, it was created with a series of pathways protected and nearly enclosed by the overarching shrubs and trees that defined them. The child Edward, during his visit, was given free range to wander through all parts of Mrs. Rider's garden at will. Very late one afternoon—it must have been in September when shadows have begun to lengthen and the light become more interesting—Edward found a small, stone bench just the right size for himself and so he sat looking over a large section of the garden. Gradually the sun began to set, and the boy watched everything become suffused with gold. In turn, he felt the gold well up from his own soul, as if some extraordinary being had taken up residence beside him and blessed him. As he told it, his early experience of being immersed in a kind of mystical beauty was not only inspiring at the time, but later helped him recover his own wounded senses and strengthened his resolve to get out of the navy and devote his life to his art.

I suppose I would have to say that Edward Calvert was always my favourite among the "Ancients," which is what they called themselves once they all had met and befriended one another. It always tickles me that they were all so dreadfully young at the time they chose the name, but what they had in mind was "Ancients" as opposed to "Moderns," men who could appreciate the beauty of Greek art, of Michel Angelo's and of Dürer's. They aspired to live without any modern inventions or machinery. It was Samuel Palmer who first thought of getting away from London, living in a more ancient setting—even bucolic, like that of our Virgil woodcuts. He discovered his ideal in an area about twenty miles from London, called Shoreham, and, eventually, he actually moved there with his father. The old man was a retired bookseller and had a wonderful library, which went with them to Shoreham.

Even before that more permanent move came about, young Palmer would arrange rented rooms for members of the group—who alternately called themselves Extollagers, a term whose meaning one has to surmise as somewhere among eccentric, ecstatic, and some Latin root that Will identified as meaning to raise up or build. Personally, I think they liked the sheer sound of it, for they were all in love with words and regularly read poetry aloud to one another. However the name actually came to be, it was what the country folk in Shoreham liked to call them. Possibly they

recognized the silly pun contained in the name: those who extol age. In fact, what they did when they gathered in Shoreham was to paint, read, swim, and live as simply as they knew how. Their notion of simplicity in nature included rejoicing in thunder storms, through which they sang and danced outside, giving the villagers even more fuel for the idea that these young men were somehow practicing witchcraft in the Shoreham countryside.

The Ancients drank only green tea and ate very simply—mostly fresh fruits, vegetables and bread—which made Will a welcome guest when he was able to join them. Not that he was able to go very often, for all of this happened when he was already ailing, his health unreliable and travelling difficult. I never made the trip myself. It always seemed to me such a colony of men, living as a band of male hermits might, that I would be intruding on their privacy were I to accept their invitations, and I found reasons not to go which I sent along with Will. But it was a wonderful tonic for him those times he was able to go. We would spend hours discussing his reports when he returned. From his descriptions, Shoreham always sounded to me like the Beulah-land that Will longed for and made manifest, especially in the woodcuts. Its orchards were fragrant with pink and white blossoms in springtime and laden heavily with fruit in the autumn. At night all was bathed in silver moonlight, ghostly and mysterious, which the young men delighted in trying to capture in their work.

Catherine, you piqued my curiosity with your stories about the group of followers, the Ancients, and I've done some reading about them. There were actually more in that group than the ones you've told us about, weren't there?

That's right, there were several more. There were Frederick Tatham, and his younger brother Arthur who was still in school at Cambridge, I believe. Frederick Tatham really belongs to a still later part of our story, but it's true he was a member of the group. There were also a few other artists and even a stock broker, John Giles by name. Nevertheless, the ones I've written about were the ones closest to us, the artists most admiring of William's work, and the ones we saw most often.

That brings me to another question. In one of the sources I found, it said that Edward Calvert married a woman named Mary Bennell in 1824, when she was just nineteen and he, twenty-five. As I recall, you told us that none of the young men you wrote about was married or even seriously courting. Isn't that right?

It's true, that's what I did write, but you may be correct. It's possible that Edward and Mary were already married at the time we met him. They may even have gone to Shoreham together a few times. As a matter of fact, I may have gone to Shoreham once, with Will, now that I think of it. You

know, it's really difficult for me to separate out what Will reported about Shoreham, what young Palmer, Richmond, & Calvert told me, and what I've seen in artwork, from what I might have seen with my own eyes or even in my own Imagination. I just can't say for sure at this point in my life.

I think I can understand that. It does, however, make me wonder about your idea that at Shoreham they were a "colony of men, living as a band of male hermits might," and that, as such, you would be intruding on their privacy as a woman visitor.

You know, I don't think it does. In spite of what you've just told me, and in spite of the fact that I may have been a visitor at Shoreham myself, I still think that idea holds. For all I know, the idea itself may have come as a result of my visiting them all at Shoreham; for all we know, Mary Calvert may have had a similar feeling as a result of her visits there. Old Mr Palmer was a widower, young Mr Palmer, a bachelor, and so on. Somehow, the little portion of their lives spent there at Shoreham seemed to be very womanless, very bachelor-like. In fact, the way they lived *was* bachelor-like. What was feminine at Shoreham was the landscape itself and the art that came out of it, the Beulah-land likeness of it all.

What about Beulah-land? I remember it comes from the Book of Isaiah, "Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate: but thou shalt be called Hephzi-bah, and thy land Beulah: for the Lord delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married." You seem to indicate this had a very special meaning for your husband, perhaps for you as well.

Ah well, yes, Beulah-land. That may be the most difficult question you've asked me so far. I don't think I can *explain* my idea of Beulah-land to anyone nor can I speak for my husband's understanding of it. I can say for me it has something to do with creativity, with the teeming world of dreams, with conjugal love in its largest, deepest meaning. I can tell you some lines my husband wrote; you may not have read them, because they are from *Vala, or The Four Zoas*, which never got finished, never was published. I memorized these lines at the time he first wrote them in the manuscript, and they have remained for me a kind of touchstone all these years. Shall I speak them for you?

Please.

Here they are. This is Beulah-land for me.

> There is from Great Eternity a mild & pleasant rest
> Named Beulah, a Soft Moony Universe feminine lovely,
> Pure mild & Gentle, given in Mercy to those who sleep
> Eternally. Created by the Lamb of God around
> On all sides within & without, the Universal Man.

The Daughters of Beulah follow sleepers in all their Dreams,
Creating Spaces lest they fall into Eternal Death.
The Circle of Destiny complete, they gave to it a Space,
And namd the Space Ulro & brooded over it in care & love.

Listening to those lines—the way you speak them, and their sounds and images—does give me a sense of what you're feeling when you think of Beulah-land. What about William? I know you've said you can't speak for him, but you could probably guess what he'd say if we could ask him about Beulah-land.

Well, you may remember that wonderful opening to William's poem *Milton*, where he speaks directly to the Daughters of Beulah.

Are they in your head as well?

They are.

Daughters of Beulah! Muses who inspire the Poets Song:
Record the journey of immortal Milton thro' your Realms
Of terror & mild moony lustre, in soft sexual delusions
Of varied beauty, to delight the wanderer and repose
His burning thirst & freezing hunger! Come into my hand
By your mild power; descending down the Nerves of my right arm
From out the Portals of my Brain, where by your ministry
The Eternal Great Humanity Divine planted his Paradise
And in it caus'd the Spectres of the Dead to take sweet forms
In likeness of himself.

Have you always been such a memorizer of poetry, Catherine?

I have always had a good ear for memorizing things, ever since childhood, when the option of reading was not open to me. Somehow, it has continued all of my life. A great deal of my husband's poetry is in my memory, some of it even includes the melodies that go with it. Will always liked hearing me recite his poetry—enjoyed listening to the differences between men's and women's voices.

Before we finish with the subject of Beulah-land, didn't John Bunyan write about it as well?

Yes, in his *Pilgrim's Progress,* which I always found a dreary and difficult poem to read, but Will was very taken with it. He painted a set of twenty-nine water-colours for the work during the last years of his life. They're quite different from other water-colours he had done, and I doubt that many people have ever seen them. They were not quite finished when he died.

You've mentioned three works that your husband illustrated towards the end of his life, I think—The Book of Job, *the* Dante, *and now* Pilgrim's Progress. *They're all religious books, but none of them were written by William*

Blake. That seems like a significant change to me. Do you remember the conversation you and I had about why William's prophetic books were not taken from the Bible, why they weren't peopled with biblical characters with recognizable names? When did that change? Did he simply stop writing his own things at some point?

You know, at a certain point, I think William did suffer a sea-change. In the middle period of his life, we were both so hopeful about all the prophetic books he was writing. We worked so hard to produce the illuminated pages of *Jerusalem*, of *Milton*, of *America*, and they all came so directly from his own visions. I think he was truly surprised that no one seemed to understand them, that people simply dismissed them as the work of a madman, and, at a certain point, he just gave up on the idea that people could understand what he was saying. Instead, he turned to solid religious works well-known to readers as familiar classics. That way he could work on great books people thought they understood, but he could express his own interpretations through the artwork he created to illustrate them. And it helped very much that Mr Linnell was willing to pay for these illustrations as William produced them. It was John Linnell who first suggested that Will make a set of engravings from the water-colours he had done as illustrations to the *Book of Job*, and he also commissioned the Dante illustrations. Does that answer your question?

I think so.

3 Fountain Court
London,1826

Dear Friend in Imagination,

You might think I had forgotten you because of the long hiatus in my letter-writing. It isn't so. Simply, our lives are busier, more sociable these days. At the same time, and in between visits to Collins's Farm to see the Linnells of a Sunday, I've had to nurse Will through bouts of shivering fits and fever that put him to bed for a time and leave him weak when they finish with him. Not that he's any trouble during these episodes. He's cheerful and uncomplaining. Only that he insists on working, so there's a certain amount of backing and forthing with art supplies & books to his bed.

What troubles me is a scene I saw while walking the other day, for, although Will's walking has been limited by his weakness of late, I'm out and about on errands when I know he's comfortable and well supplied for his work on Mr Linnell's *Dante*. You might suppose, as others have, that my sister and I would consort these days, now that we live in the same house. It isn't so. When our former landlord at South Molton Street sold his business (with our flat) and left the country, we were grateful to find these two pleasant rooms in my brother-in-law's house near the Strand. We

even see a small slice of the Thames out the window of the work room, and I've come finally to see an advantage of having only two rooms: it's much easier to keep two rooms tidy than six or seven.

Back to my sister, the wife of Henry Banes, our present landlord, and why the two of us have not renewed our relationship under these circumstances. In the first place, husband and wife argue incessantly whenever he's at home. One would think that, not having had children, they would have grown closer together over the years, ever more amicable, but in their case it didn't happen. My sister never learned to read and write, and resents anyone around her who happens to be literate. She's perpetually angry, sure she's being cheated out of one thing or another, and not above striking out physically when provoked. In fact, since we live on the lowest floor of the house, we're never sure when we hear sounds of fisticuffs followed by a great thud late at night, who might be hitting the floor, he or she. As Will enjoys pointing out, the one thing we can be quite sure is the sounds will not embarrass them: not sounds of love, but of war.

Need I add that my sister has nothing but disdain for Mr Blake. She professes it impossible for him to have a high level of intelligence or talent if it produces so little money. She has even been known to question friends who have run into her when they came for a visit, asking their opinions about Will's "insanity" and whether they wouldn't honestly think it better for him to be housed in Bedlam—in Bethlehem Hospital—than in the Banes's house. Nevertheless, we have our privacy for the most part, as our quarters are quite separate from theirs; but you can see that our blood tie means nothing, and our relationship is a business matter only. They own the house, and we pay rent regularly.

So much for a sister I might confide in. Again, I turn to you for an intimate ear, for I don't want to trouble Will. You know how it is when you're walking in London these days. In the streets a person must always keep to the right-hand side, the carriages always driving the reverse. The streets teem with people walking and riding, and you can see a whole, long line, one coming, the other going, if you dare to look in the distance as you walk. As for the footpaths on the side, they are usually so filled with people that if you make a sudden stop as a foot passenger, you may stop fifty people behind you. At the same time, there are often as many people again who are *not* really going anywhere, who are more or less trying to stay in one place. They have large labels pasted on boards that inform the passersby where they should go to eat or what kind of medicine will cure whichever disease they might have. If they don't sport the boards with labels, they might try to thrust small pieces of paper into your hands that carry a similar message. Sometimes such people are merely advertising for themselves. Anyone who has ever served the royal family in the slightest way will display the royal arms on his sign and advertise himself as pastry-cook or third cobbler to his royal highness the prince regent, or whomever, thereby attracting more business for himself.

Every intersection takes on the nature of a circus, whether circular or no, and all is constantly in motion, a noisy flux, for hawkers also shout their wares, sing their selling jingles, and all at the same time.

In the midst of all this, and on my erranding the other day, a funeral came into my view. It was especially noticeable not only because of its black colour, but more so for its pace, which was so much slower than that of the general throng. Gradually, as it neared, coaches and walkers alike slowed in deference to its passing. First came two mutes, carrying black staffs and bands. They were followed by a man wearing a whole board full of jet-black ostrich feathers on his head. Next appeared the plumed hearse, with its feathers regularly nodding, and quite a procession of mourning coaches. As the hearse arrived just opposite to where I was positioned, its wheels suddenly stopped rolling, and a black-gloved hand and long arm appeared out of the window, pointing directly at me. Everyone surrounding the procession stopped as well, everyone seeming to look at me. Just as quickly, the group moved on, but, at the very end, another small group of mutes in black bands and cloaks passed by, and, as they went by, gestured to me in curious greeting. The crowd seemed to murmur a slightly nervous kind of rippling sound, then all went on about their business as if nothing untoward had happened. Except me. I felt myself breathless and dizzy. Filled with a kind of panic, I stumbled into our local tavern, where they were used to seeing me fetch Will's mealtime porter when he was not well. But I lingered there a long time before ordering it, trying to puzzle out what had just happened and feeling ashamed at the irrational fears it provoked about the life of my Will.

Several days have now passed since the incident I described, and Will is up and about once more, in good spirits and even able to accept an invitation to pay a visit to Shoreham, where those fond young men (who funnily enough call themselves "the Ancients") are now renting some rooms for a time. Yet I am plagued by what I saw, and what I felt, and what I very much fear it may signify, even though I am not at all by nature a superstitious person.

Can you think more clearly than I and give me your thoughts?

Yours sincerely,
Catherine Blake

My Dear Catherine,

Your description of the funeral procession is chilling, and I don't think it at all strange that you should be shaken by it. The presence of mutes in the procession is not that unusual, but I would agree that they carry with them all kinds of unpleasant reminders of things unnatural, even unspeakable. I'm glad you've been able to speak about the event, at least to me.

I expect that Will is enjoying himself at Shoreham today, which gives us a chance to go over your letter a bit together. At least I can give you my thoughts about it, which is what you asked me for. Let's assume I am the wiser part of you and that, when one or another of your old fears is called up, I am the poor creature gets buried beneath your confusion.

Starting with the ancient history part, your sister strongly reminds you of your childhood and growing up, of the life you escaped and so happily left behind. Or did you? Just being at all dependent on the Banes's in any way undoubtedly arouses all kinds of reminders of how you felt under your father's roof: how pathetic your mother seemed most of the time, her physical strength exhausted by constant childbearing episodes, several of her infants dying in childbirth. Now you feel sorry for your father as well, though as a child you barely knew him. He had no time for you, and his responsibilities never stopped hounding him. How did he ever feed all you children? Poorly, yes, but that he was able to do it at all and not be crushed by the demands of such a large family in a business so determined by the vagaries of weather, of war and fluctuating trade and tariff, is all a wonder to Catherine the grown-up.

Although you never say so directly in your letter, your sister must be especially resentful of you. While she has managed to claw her way out of her background by marrying a man who happens to have prospered by clever manipulation of London property he happened upon just at the right time and in the right place, she might just as well be back in Battersea, married to a market gardener. She hasn't changed, and is no more of a real person now than she was when she was your younger sister, resentful of the chores your father set her and sure that you weren't doing your share of the work. She always accused you of being a dreamer, made fun of you for wanting to tell stories to the younger ones, for remembering and embroidering tales you had picked up, seemingly out of the air. No wonder she is resentful of you still, even more now, as she watches you going in and out of the house with books from the circulating library, exuding some quiet joy that has eluded her all of her life.

I can tell you wonder whether alcohol is what provokes all the physical blows you overhear at odd hours. They both seem to consume a lot. Should you try to say something to her? To Henry? I think not. There was never any kindly understanding between you and your sister as you were growing up. Given her ever-present resentments and her opinion about your husband, not to speak of your status as impoverished tenant, it is unlikely she would take any suggestion of yours to heart. Anyway, who ever said blood ties were guarantees of affection or respect? Observation has shown you how rare it is for members of a family to have any real understanding of one another. Consider yourself fortunate to have simply a business arrangement with Henry Banes and his wife, and by all means don't make any attempt to change it.

Save your energy for your life with Will. Again, you didn't say so directly, but it sounds as though Will's health is deteriorating; the bouts of shivering fits when he's bedridden, more frequent. You are a good nurse to him. You don't seem to mind emptying the chamber pot so often when the diarrhea comes on, and his fastidious cleanliness about his person is a blessing as long as you keep plenty of water warm on the hearth. What is it that's so frightening about his illness? Is it the pain, which you can't share when it attacks him somewhere near his belly? Is it the fact that the doctors don't really have any cures when the attacks come, and it's so hard to know he's suffering, no matter how he tries to keep on with his work, even in the thick of it? At its worst, it's terrible to watch the shivering fits come on and take over his robust body until the bed itself rattles on the floor, but what you do for them seems to help, and he receives your help so graciously. What else is there besides holding him, especially massaging the high-arched feet you so love in hopes to reduce swollen ankles, applying cool cloths to his head for lowering the fever, singing old songs he requests, and reading aloud?

One thing I do know troubles you is your overwhelming temptation to go to John Varley and ask for his predictions about Will's illness. How often have you thought of that over the last six months? You would like him to read the entrails of the universe for you and inform you whether Will can recover from whatever the illness is, and, if so, when and how. At the same time, you fear what he could say when he has consulted his charts and done his complicated figurings. You fear he might very well make some hideous pronouncement that looms like a waiting guillotine. And yet you know better than that. You know that the truth of John Varley's figurings is not at issue in this case.

For one thing, you know that, as terrible as the suffering of pain and shivering fits may be, Will has no fear of death itself. What is it he has often said—that he feels it may be like passing from one room to another? You know no one else better prepared for death than your husband. His detachment from the world around him has grown and grown, he is at peace with how he has spent his life, and he continues to be inspired to bring forth work.

It must be you, Catherine, who fear his death. In spite of the real progress you've made encouraging your own visionary world to unfold, you still don't really trust it. You doubt that Will's promise to be present to you always, whether in life or death, can ever be fulfilled. In fact, it makes me wonder whether the incident you described in your letter actually happened in the streets of London at all. It might have been a strong dream, or—if you insist it happened in the daytime while you were out walking—it could have been sourced in your own Imagination. It could have been a vision of your own, a dark vision so real as to have been true, and terribly frightening.

I can hear you ask, "Why would I conjure up a vision so terrifying? What good is such an ugly, dark vision?"

What comes immediately and unbidden to mind is,"Behold now Behemoth which I made with thee." Picture again the two gigantic animals in his engraving for the *Book of Job*, their terrible teeth and gleaming eyes, their brutality and strength. Remember the engraved captions he added to one side:"Of Behemoth he saith,'He is the chief of the ways of God.' Of Leviathan he saith,'He is King over all the Children of Pride.'" How often you protested to Will that you didn't really understand what all that meant, why the seemingly ugly and evil side of things was also of man and his God, had such value even. And yet you did understand it, and in the deepest part of yourself, the part where visions originate. Just as, with Job, this vision signals the beginning of *his* real understanding, of his redemption, so you now have a manifestation of your own understanding. Within you lies that whole powerful universe, containing forces that would seem contradictory to the uninitiated eye. Now that you've had a genuine experience of how that happens, you needn't be so frightened if it happens again. You may even welcome it as sacred knowledge.

Be reassured.

Your Friend in Imagination

Looking back on it now, I see there were so many plans designed to ease the inevitable. Will's terrible bouts of illness came and went, each time leaving him a little weaker than the one before. Still he kept working (and joying in the work), except when he was in the shaking paroxysm, or, more rarely, the brief periods of delusions, when I couldn't follow him where he was. He was finishing the Dante watercolors, the Dante engravings, always perfecting *The Last Judgment*, and, most fiercely, colouring yet another version of that glorious old tyrant from years before, 'The Ancient of Days.' The relief etching was for Frederick Tatham this time; the *Dante*, for John Linnell, who had also provided a one hundred-page folio of elegant Dutch paper for the project. The folio was especially convenient for working in bed, and we kept the pencil and water-colours handy to his reach. He worked without stinting, even when in pain, except when the extreme shivering fits precluded his being able to hold any tool in his hand.

March was awful; by May, he was up and about, able to attend a party given by that overly curious journalist Crabb Robinson, who enjoyed quizzing him to flesh out his own copy and his own"crabbed" opinion about Will's state of mind. Never mind. Will enjoyed the gathering, but John Linnell was there and saw he was failing. Knew, and suggested that we spend at least part of the summer at Hope Cottage in Hampstead, near to the house he and Mary Ann had at Collins's farm with their several children. Will had such fond memories of his earlier Sundays at the Linnell's. I went only once or twice myself, but it was obvious to me how fond they all were of him—Mary Ann, who sang the Scottish ballads that so enchanted Will, and the children, who loved hearing his

stories and making drawings for him which they stored up 'gainst his next arrival. In August when we both went—Will having turned down John's offer of Hope Cottage while he was still abed so long in July—we needed to find money to go by cabriolet: Will's piles became a torture in the Hampstead carriage, and he was honestly too weak to attempt the walking we once relished.

In years past, when Will's health still permitted him to enjoy Sunday dinners with John and Mary Ann, he would walk the distance to Hampstead, knowing how troublesome the carriage was to his subsequent sitting down, even at that time. Young Palmer lived on Broad Street, so it was easy for Will to fetch him on his way for company on the journey out. All the Ancients loved to tell a story about Will and Samuel that occurred at the Collins's farm during this period. I was not there, but heard the story so many times, I feel I remember it first hand. The Linnells, the robust Mr Varley, and a few others, including Edward Calvert, were sitting companionably late one Sunday afternoon. Young Palmer had left on the coach for London some time before, when Will suddenly clapped his hand to his head and announced, "Palmer is coming. He is walking up the road." Everyone was alarmed, thinking Will was ailing again, perhaps feverish and delirious. "Oh, Mr Blake," said Calvert, "you know he's gone to London. Remember we saw him off in the coach." But Will was not to be dissuaded, and said, "He's coming through the wicket." As indeed he was, arriving in their midst to announce that his coach had broken down at the approach to Lullingstone Park.

Whether walking or riding, the way out to Hampstead was lovely. As you neared the Collins's farm, the countryside became more verdant and rolling. Then, coming over the brow of the last hill on the winding road, the glint of a bright red roof appears through the tops of trees that grow thickly in a deep hollow. Under it sat the old farm-house, where the Linnell family lived in just one section—a charming, cottage-like addition of just five rooms. Going out the back door, you saw little else but rolling meadows bordered by hedgerows, while the hillside in front was covered in musky-smelling heather of the purplish sort; the southern exposure in the front shed light on it most of the day in good weather; by evening both colour and smell were darkening and pungent. The southern aspect also encouraged the large garden that stretched between the front of the house and the view of the nearby hillside. You had to pass through the garden to reach the entrance to the Linnells' cottage, and it was a shock to the eyes on a sunny day to go through the bright and airy garden and into the very low-ceilinged dusk of the inside.

Of course it was lively in there as well, especially when the children had been coaxed inside. Linnell's wife, Mary Ann, who I believe was never terribly taken with me, made everyone comfortable and was never bothered by what seemed like chaos. Not only were the children to be fed and looked after, but, whenever I was there, and even when—as was more our custom—Will went

without me, there were usually any number of others for company. Dr Thornton, their physician, whose Virgil turned out to be a bone of some contention for Will, was often there and came to look after Will when he was in need of a physician's care. Big-boned John Varley also came, and had to fold himself in some way in order to clear the top of his head at the doorways. Young Palmer, I mentioned, often accompanied Will in the days when he regularly walked. There were others as well. Of course in good weather, there was the whole outdoors to roam, beauties for the young ones to sketch, and quiet shaded nooks where Will could draw from his Imagination, so it was like having several large rooms added on. But everyone had also to eat, and Mrs Linnell was quite a marvel at providing those kinds of comforts.

At any rate, there was no doubt in my mind that Will was their most welcome company, and they took excellent care of him when he came. If the evening had fallen and grown chilly when it was time to leave, Mary Ann would take her warmest and softest shawl, wrap it around Will's shoulders, and give him a lantern to light his way on the long walk home. It was clear to me that he would have enjoyed our staying for a time in the Hope cottage nearby that John had offered us that next-to-the-last summer. The two of us talked about it a great deal, and I was of several minds about it. Somehow, the climate at Hampstead invariably brought periods of diarrhea for Will in the aftermath of a visit—no matter how enjoyable the visit itself—in fact he insisted this had been the inevitable result of such jaunts even in his childhood. That was a caution. I was never entirely comfortable with the Linnells, but it no longer seemed so important compared with Will's recovery. He, on the other hand, grew more and more protective of his remaining work time, more in need of solitude and our familiar surroundings and routines for dealing with the nasty periods of pain, frequent washing, and changes of linen.

A violent attack soon prevented us from considering the matter any further, for Will ended up in bed nearly the entire month of July. By the time that subsided, Will's appearance was quite shocking, he was so diminished, and he was keenly aware of it. He described himself as being "only bones and sinews, all strings and bobbins like a weaver's loom." It was that bad. Will was deeply grateful to be able to work for longer periods before tiring, and now—with all the rest—added his own illuminated version of the *Book of Genesis* to the various works he was finishing for John Linnell, who by now was giving us regular amounts of money each week, on accounts we each kept for the promised works.

A few more things stand out in my memory from the last few years with Will, perhaps not in chronological order, but with priority. The Scottish song Will first heard at the Linnell's in

Hampstead is one, because he loved the tune and sang it for me often when we were alone at Fountain Court. It's hard to imagine any sweeter tribute to a woman than that first stanza:

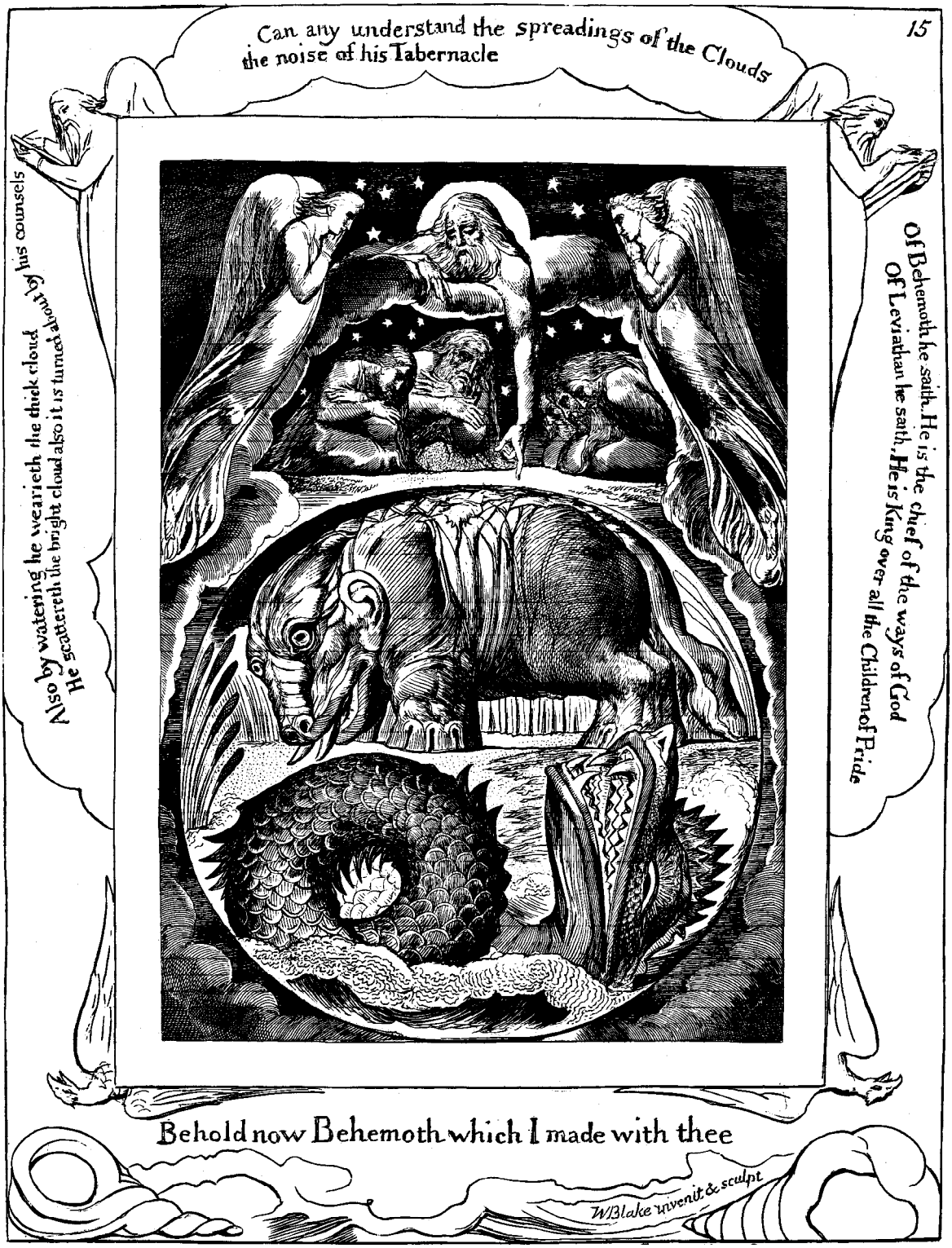
> O Nancy's hair is yellow as gold,
> And her eyes as they lift are blue,
> Her face is the image o' heavenly love
> An' her heart is loyal and true.

As Will first heard it, Mary Ann Linnell accompanied herself on their pianoforte, singing the Border Melody in the special kind of purring voice she had. When Will did it for me, he always protested that it sounded so much better with the instrument, which he could still hear in his head. I then imagined the rolling chords of a harp or the plucked sound of the instrument Job's wife was playing in the last plate of Will's *Job* series, the top of its neck angled back lute-like from the fingerboard. Neither of us had formal training in an instrument or the arts of written notation; nevertheless, we had hundreds of melodies with their words in our heads, and Will made his own for his songs.

The engravings he made as *Illustrations For the Book of Job* are filled with music, not only in the cadences of the biblical verses, but in the many instruments that appear in the opening and closing plates and in borders that he drew to adorn each picture. Job's story—his baffling, agonizing trials—fascinated Will as long as I can remember. I'm sure it was within the first years of our marriage that he began a whole variety of drawings, sketches, quotations, intermixed with his own ideas and interpretations about what was really going on in the story of Job, which other people missed, or misunderstood. About three decades later, he made a full set of water-colours to illustrate *Job* for Thomas Butts; the next year, two sets for John Linnell, who then commissioned the engravings. They are the illustrations decorated with words and images in their borders, making further comments on the story.

As the Book opens, Job and his extended family are on their knees, praying with piously folded hands, eyes demurely cast down, while all sorts of instruments hang in the huge tree, as if pasted to the broad trunk. Its canopy is enormous; they sit directly beneath it, Job and his wife with big books, tightly bound and open on their laps. At the end, everyone is standing under the same tree; each is making music with song, horns, pipes, and strings, including variously shaped harps. Eyes are at rapt attention. Gone are the ponderous books from the foreground and the Gothic cathedral from the background. Instead of a book, the daughter who sings holds a loose scroll that sweeps across the front of her body. Sun and crescent moon have exchanged places, left and right, from the beginning of the story. The way Job's story is illustrated and annotated by my husband, it is not so much afflictions like family disasters, sore boils, and scornful neighbours that so terrify. Instead, it

is the awful dreams and visions that Job must endure—such as the God who appears with Job's face and with cloven hoof, or the Behemoth and Leviathan uncovered within Job's soul. In the



water-colours, a person might be able to view the story in a more comfortable, traditional way. William's engravings make his interpretation explicit, and—in case we don't want to consider it—he directs us in words how to go about looking at his pictures.

It always surprised me that sets of the *Job* illustrations ever sold at all: the biblical story is painful in itself; Will's version fills us with the most somber and soul-searching music. But people did buy them; I sold some myself and wondered just how the readers understood what they saw and heard. Was it too painful, or enlightening? As a key to the depths of my husband's mind, does the sum of the engravings confirm or disprove his so-called madness?

Mr Crabb Robinson, the noted journalist, delighted in goading Will into long interviews designed to reveal his wildest thoughts. He might present him with some poetry written by a contemporary and ask Will for his opinion, or give out a controversial idea he suspected would be anathema to us. In the last years he came to us several times at Fountain Court, and it was plain to me what he had in mind: If Will's responses to the goads were too moderate, Mr Robinson would leave after a short while, clearly disappointed in what he had elicited.

Other times, he got what he was fishing for. At one of the interviews, they were discussing Voltaire, and Will revealed that he had several times had conversations with the famous French writer. Robinson immediately wanted to know in what language Voltaire spoke, knowing that Will had some Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, but not French. (In fact, Will was currently in the process of adding Italian, in order to check Carey's English translation of the *Dante* he was working on, but I'm not sure Mr Robinson knew that.) William told him that it was like the touch of a musical key, which Voltaire probably touched in French, but to my husband's ear became English. This was just the kind of thing Robinson loved to hear. Now he was sure he had caught WB on a good day and pressed him further about his writing.

Will told him he had already written more than either Voltaire or Rousseau: six or seven epic poems as long as Homer and twenty tragedies as long as Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Robinson's eyes lit up. I knew that most of this remained unprinted. Who knows how much of Voltaire, Rousseau, or Shakespeare remained in notebooks, also? Nevertheless, I didn't say much of this, since the two men seemed so fired up by their conversation. I was not about to interfere with my husband's pleasure at the chase.

The next thing, Will went on to talk about his current writing, saying he would not print any more. "I write," he added, "when commanded by the spirits, and the moment I have written, I see the words fly about the room in all directions. It is then published, and the Spirits can read. My manuscripts are of no further use. I have been tempted to burn my manuscripts, but my wife won't let me." Robinson immediately agreed that such writings were from a higher order, not simply from

himself. Thus WB didn't really own them and had no way of knowing what purpose they may answer unbeknownst to us. Will was surprised and quite delighted at the understanding implied in Robinson's comment and said that he would not destroy them. This pleased all of us and, before leaving, Mr Robinson bought one of Will's favourite copies of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

Such was the compass of my husband's music-making, that he could go from the somber directives he engraved for the grown-up readers of *Job* to nursery rhymes for children. His favourite of Lavater's aphorisms was "Keep him at least three paces distant who hates bread, music, and the laugh of a child." William judged it the best of the whole lot in Lavater's book, and delighted in entertaining the Linnell children with the silliest rhymes he could extemporize in order to hear them giggle. He taught them to me, and we would each try to say them very quickly to each other to evoke the merriment. One of the silliest I remember was

> The sow came in with the saddle,
> The little pig rocked the cradle,
> The dish jumped o' top of the table
> To see the brass pot swallow the ladle.
> The old pot behind the door
> Called the kettle a blackamoor.
> "Odd bobbs," said the Gridiron, "Can't you agree?
> I'm the head constable, bring them to me."

Few people would think to identify William Blake as the author, or even the improvisor of such a ditty, but then who would guess the merry times we had together, still childlike somehow ourselves in some ways, even in the last years?

The day arrives. It is hot and still, London in August. August 12. Outside it is soup-like, and inside the room as well. It seems we are all dreaming, especially Will & myself, my good neighbour the only other. She is attending, helping me keep him clean and comfortable. She listens to us, hears us dream. He sings his songs, hymns and others. We speak in liquid voices. He sings again. Suddenly, "Stay, Kate! keep just as you are—I will draw your portrait—for you have ever been an angel to me." Still the paper and pencil, always the quick, sure hand moves and sketches. Am I joyful? What does he see and make of me? Ah, it is his beloved, embodied spirit, heart beating on the paper. But this time it has exhausted him. Take away the drawing things, he has finished that part. He sings some more. What are these triumphant songs? "My beloved, they are not mine, not mine." He sees thoughts of loss flare over my face. "No, Kate, I shall never leave you. We shall never be parted and I shall be with you always." Every day faithfully? Every day. Now we are no longer dreaming. It

is so real and it will be so. He neither speaks nor sings. Enters the room, young George Richmond. He is aghast at the scene and moves at once to the bed. Kisses him. "He is gone," whispers George, and, "to keep the vision in," as he gently closes the eyes. And it is so. He is no longer there on the bed. He is not that small body with closed eyes. He is elsewhere, all around us. He fills the room. No one weeps. We are all amazed.

We buried him on August 17, one previous to the day we had been married forty-five years before in Battersea. The group attending was small in number, but everyone there had been devoted to the man in one way or another. Calvert and Richmond were with us, as well as both Tatham brothers, John Linnell, and myself. Later I saw, and copied exactly, a beautiful letter George Richmond had written to Samuel Palmer a few days before the funeral. Being quite sure Palmer would not be able to make it in to the city, he nevertheless wanted to include him among the intimates.

15 August 1827
Wednesday Evening

My Dear Friend,

Lest you should not have heard of the Death of Mr. Blake I have Written this to inform you—He died on Sunday Night at 6 o'clock in a most glorious manner. He said He was going to that Country he had all His life wished to see & expressed Himself Happy hoping for Salvation through Jesus Christ—Just before he died His countenance became fair—His eyes Brighten'd and He burst out in Singing of the things he saw in Heaven. In truth He Died like a Saint as a person who was standing by Him Observed—He is to be Buryed on Friday at 12 in morn—Should you like to go to the Funeral—If you should there will be Room in the Coach.

Yrs. affectionately
G. Richmond

During the last few days, when William and I spoke of such things, he made the decision to be buried in a common-grave at Bunhill Fields, City-Road, near Finsbury-square. There his parents, a brother, and other, more distant family members had been interred. Some people coarsely dubbed it "the fanatic burying-place," but it was in reality the official cemetery for Dissenters and the honoured resting place of John Bunyan and Quaker George Fox. As to the service itself, Will chose that of the Church of England, which pleased me very much in the hearing, for its fine cadences and constant reminders about the reality of eternal life. I shall never forget how it struck my ear when the minister said, in quite ringing tones, "The days of our age are threescore years and ten, so teach

us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto Wisdom . Comfort us again now after the time that thou hast plagued us, and for the years wherein we have suffered adversity. Prosper thou the work of our hands upon us, O prosper thou our handiwork." What perfection for this dear man, my beloved William in his seventieth year, I thought. And how thankful I was for being able to recount it for him soon after when he visited me. "Yes Kate, it is Psalm 90," he said without hesitation, "and you have skipped around in it quite a bit for my benefit, I can hear." But that was already several days later.

Mr Linnell came forward immediately when he heard that Will had died, to offer help with the funeral expenses, which I repaid as quickly as possible. The cost of a common-grave is only nineteen shillings, but there are so many other things, even for a quite plain funeral. I chose an elmwood coffin, 5 ft. 9 in., that was covered in black flannel and had three pair of handles and an inscription plate. In addition were the cloaks, crèpe hatbands, and gloves for the bearers; the use of the hearse and pair, plus a coach to go the distance to Bunhill Fields. The clergyman needed payment for conducting the funeral, as did the men who transported the coffin both times. Other dues I recall went to the grave-diggers, the use of a velvet pall, and the lime one needs these days against grave robbers.

In a month's time, I was living at Cirencester Place, where Mr Linnell kept his studio by day in the years following his family's removal to Hampstead. It was there, at the upper end of Tichfield Street, that Will and I had been invited to live rent free "as caretakers." Linnell had defined the terms that way in the winter before Will died, as a way of encouraging us to accept his offer, but I knew that Will would ultimately refuse. He was already too weak, and we needed our solitude.

Now circumstances had changed. John Linnell repeated his offer to me, and I accepted. My beloved left me entirely without debt, the inheritor of all the art works produced but not sold, plus plates for printing more. Still, it did not take long for me to conclude that, carefully selling works of art, as a widow I could live much more frugally if I did not have to continue the rental of our flat. The one item I thought to dispose of was our faithful press, which was larger than anything I could foresee requiring in the immediate future. I hoped I might trade it for a smaller one. Mr Lahee, who printed Will's *Job* plates, sent one of his men to examine it at my request, giving cause for hope. The printer himself wrote an answer to John Linnell, presuming, I suppose, that I needed his help in all business matters! Mr Lahee's response was kind but negative, including the information that wooden presses were now quite outmoded and would bring very little cash for resale. Consequently, the big old roller press was moved once again, this time to Cirencester Place, where I lived for less time than planned.

Catherine, there are a few points about your life after your husband's death that still puzzle me.

I'm not surprised.

I find myself wondering why you didn't stay permanently at Cirencester Place, at John Linnell's studio. It would seem to me that was an ideal setup for you. Linnell had long ago proved that he was dedicated to finding buyers for William's work, the family was rarely about and under foot, and your responsibilities there must have been minimal. Isn't that true?

Yes and no.

So, what were the negative things about living at Cirencester Place?

There were many, but they are difficult for me to explain. In the first place, everyone in the Linnell family adored William and missed him terribly. They not only felt sorry for me, but my very being seemed to remind them of Will's absence. I was not only a poor substitute for Mr Blake, I somehow served to remind them of how much they missed him. I, who still was able to feel his presence strongly, and even converse with him on a regular basis when I was alone, found myself having difficulty sustaining his presence in John Linnell's house. That was one thing. Another was the good man's assumption that I was incapable of selling the art works without his direction. I knew and had lived with all those works, assisted in their making, and deeply resented Mr Linnell's constant surveillance of transactions I entered into. These may sound like petty things, but they filled me with unaccustomed angers.

They don't sound petty to me, but they are very general. Were there specific points of disagreement between the two of you?

Well, it was clear to me right away that Mr Linnell did not approve of my working to finish some of Will's unfinished drawings, nor the way I worked on some of the uncoloured illuminated works that were already printed but lacking the hand-colouring that made them come so alive. Take another example. I was very fond of the water-colours Will had done for an edition of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. I knew they were not quite finished and had a strong feeling about what remained to be done. I also had a desire to spend more time sketching some things of my own, but found that Mr Linnell liked to take frequent breaks from his own work, come into the room and view whatever I was working on that day, and then give me suggestions for improvement, as if I were a student of his. Or perhaps, if it was something of Will's I was working on, he would offer suggestions about how he thought Mr Blake would want it done. This was impossible for me, especially as I was living there out of his grace. I had repaid any monies owing him and soon

wanted nothing more than to cease feeling that I needed to defer to him, whether to his kindness or to his assumption that he knew my husband's wishes better than I.

I think I can understand that. Didn't you once make reference to Mary Ann Linnell's dislike of you? Was that also a factor?

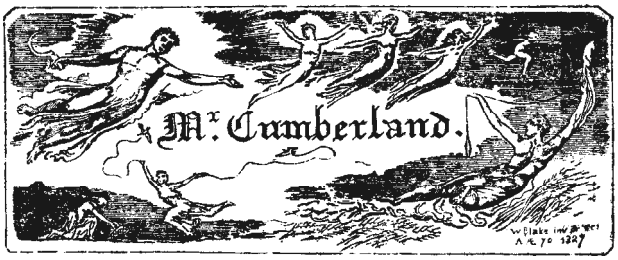
I'm sure it was. You see, Mrs Linnell is one of those women who does everything, and does it all admirably. She produces children easily, cooks lovely meals easily, entertains guests in a gracious way. She is well educated, and ever gave me to understand that my lack of education was not something that could be mended. Rather, education, reading aloud, instruction on the pianoforte, should be begun in earliest childhood. Even worse, I always had the impression that she didn't believe I truly understood or appreciated my husband. In short, I suppose I am saying that she aroused all the old jealousies I ever had and hoped I had long ago conquered. It wasn't like it was in the early days, when I feared that a woman such as Mary Wollstonecraft might annex my husband. It was as if Mrs Linnell still wanted Will to open his eyes to the subtle qualities he might have missed in a woman by tying his life to mine. It was a terrible situation for me. I became tongue-tied in her presence the few times I visited at Hampstead. I even suspected when I was at Cirencester Place that Mary Ann inquired about me when she and her husband were together, and that they expressed their mutual sympathy over Will's misfortune at having spent a lifetime with me. Perhaps you have now heard more than you wanted to know. Forgive me for going on so long.

Of William's appearances to me, I can only describe their typical manner of coming on, not attempt to give a reasoned explanation. Only the first time was at all fearful. It occurred during the period between his death and his burial several days later at Bunhill Fields. As I have related elsewhere, Will's presence was palpable to all three of us who were in the room following his death, and it continued for me into the day following. The necessity of making burial arrangements forced me out of the house at Fountain Court; I worried that my leaving the premises might erase his presence for me, but it was there upon my return, though perhaps not quite so strong. My gradual, ever-diminishing sense of the presence that had been so clear at his death was distressing, and I slept brokenly the night before his burial. Towards dawn on the 17th, out of a fitful doze, I was aware of an eerie, yellowish green light that was like a stain spreading in two directions from the corner of the room opposite our bed where I lay; it was high up on the wall, almost to the ceiling. It was frightening, because it was a colour I had never before seen—not like any of our inks, water-colours, or mixtures of pigments. It was more light than colour, but at the same time it was

stained, not clear. First appeared his face, followed by his voice, both strong and robust, nothing like the sickened form that had died on the bed I now occupied. He urged me to be of good cheer, to get on with his burial, and promised, once more, that he would never leave me. He advised strong tea for fortifying myself, then disappeared in a soft glow of light. That was all there was to it the first time—just the face and the voice. Later he would appear in fuller form, sit in a chair opposite me as we talked, visiting for at least an hour. I was no longer surprised.

By the following April, I had already moved from Cirencester Place and was living as a "housekeeper" with Mr and Mrs Frederick Tatham, though we all knew my talents were decidedly limited in that sphere. I was very much in a period of recuperation, and not much of anything was required of me in the way of real work. Mostly, young Tatham asked for stories about our life. He seemed to be making notes a great deal of the time, and wanted my help so he could write something that would make up for the neglect and misunderstanding that Mr Blake suffered so long, as he put it. At that point Frederick Tatham still brought to my mind the role of the Ancients in our life, and I had a great fondness for him.

Several lengthy death notices brought Will's work to the attention of a fickle public, and I was able to sell a number of the works. It was a period when many concerned themselves with Blake's widow, and not friends and acquaintances only. Princess Sophia, sister to King George, sent a gift— in support of my welfare. It was a generous £100, which I returned with a note of thanks for money which could make the difference between life and death for some person more needy by far than I. Some people I knew from the past. A well-off gentleman from our days in Felpham paid a goodly eighty guineas for a water-colour drawing to complement others he had bought long ago. Furthermore, he let me know in no uncertain terms how much he regretted our having left Felpham, how much he had missed the person of William Blake. The Mr Cary who had translated the *Dante* Will relied on to shore up his Italian—I believe it was the first translation of the work into the English language—bought a drawing from me, and others followed, a few of them women. What pleased me most was selling to people who were themselves artists; it delighted me to inform Wm of these in our regular afternoon visits.



Following some complicated transactions, the young George Cumberland came to pick up the plate for his father's calling card, which was really the last thing William ever set his graver to, and I knew he would have done more

on it had he lived. I told this to the younger George when he came. Apparently the senior Cumberland had intended merely to have Will add a few flourishes to the already existing plate, but I believe he was pleased with the airborne figures and sportive youths who danced around the name on his new plate. The letter he wrote to me stated that the only reason he had not continued to collect all the engraved works we had produced was a lack of funds. He promised to look for a buyer for a set of the *Job* engravings Will had placed in his hands, and had some specific suggestions for how I could best exhibit and sell my husband's works. It was well-meaning advice, I am certain, which I had no intentions of following.

Tatham had no trouble with my completing illuminated books that still required colouring, or working on unfinished drawings, for that matter. He of course also had his own ideas about how best to handle the sale of Will's remaining works, about what would be most beneficial to my life, as if William were no longer involved in my decisions. My anger was aroused more than once; we had our scraps and scrapes, but I knew he always had my best interests at heart. If anything, Tatham was too sympathetic to my cause, and he encouraged me to admit that Will & I continued to feel that the plates for the *Dante* engravings should be mine. Tensions rapidly mounted between him and John Linnell over the ownership of the *Dante* plates, accountings were requested, and legal expertise threatened. I was caught in the middle, and it hasn't been resolved to this day.

I, meanwhile, living in the house where the good intentions of Mr and Mrs Frederick Tatham prevailed over all else, began to realize I had got lost. Catherine Sophia Blake was recognizable to me only during those hours when Will & I conversed. (Not that I doubted for a moment the part of his appearance, consumed by several years of illness—bile mixing with the blood being named the cause—that lay in an elm coffin at Bunhill Fields. This other was a presence that survived in air and light.) Was it all right for the Catherine I knew to disappear each time he disappeared? Mightn't there be a way to find a recognizable Catherine Blake during the other hours of the day? I wasn't at all sure how to discover such a person, and chose not to burden anyone else with the question, not even my beloved.

I began sketching a great deal, as freely as possible, and from my Imagination as Will had always advised. I showed these to no one, choosing to be my own critic as well as interpreter. I began to be very disciplined about encouraging visions and observant about the conditions that brought them on. Fire and water seemed the most fertile grounds. When the weather permitted, I would walk to a river, not the Thames, but a smaller one away from the noise that permeated the commercial areas around the port. I walked in a leisurely fashion, but with movements quite rhythmic and deliberate. Sitting on the bank, I would allow my eyes to go soft, so that I could be aware of all that was around me, but without any piercing focus. Some days the result was simply restful,

restorative, somehow even informative. Other days a procession of figures would emerge from the water, reveal their clothing and colours in a smoky fashion; then, without warning, disappear without a word. I longed for them to lengthen their stay but said nothing, hoping they would in time feel more at home with me.

Experimenting with the element of fire produced results quite different. For one thing, the fire was in my own room, where I lived and slept, where William and I met in the afternoons. By this time I no longer lived with the Tathams, but had a room that was truly my own, at 17 Charlton Street. My experiments went on in the evening, on cold evenings when I could legitimately build up the fire until a whole myriad of colours resulted. Whereas at the river the colours were watery and smoky, the colours of the fire element were brilliant, too bright to be comfortable for any hard looking. Again, I would soften my gaze as an enticement to seeing more. What appeared in the fire were not figures, but faces. When they appeared they were not always pleasant. It took some time for a face to differentiate itself from the flames that surrounded it, as if a hard edge—like an incised or inked black line—needed to surround the face in order to bring it forward into clear recognition. This process was somehow painful, not for me, but painful for the emergent creature. Usually the pain was so acute that the face would burn itself up in the flames almost immediately it had fully emerged. A strong desire grew in me to catch the face on paper before this happened, and eventually I began arming myself with paper and pencil. Water-colour paints were at my feet in the hope I would have time to capture a sense of the true colour before anything was lost. (I had by this time realized that, unlike Wm, the element of either water or fire was necessary to stimulate my Imagination.)

The face I finally caught and kept is in sharp profile, the head of a woman, and the vision brought with it a powerful disturbance. In its wake, and while I was still intent on capturing the colour and form, came a sharp smell and sound. The sound was not that one long familiar to me—popping and hissing of resin in the logs, or the peculiar noise that occurs when wood too young and green is burnt without proper curing. This was different, and it took several seconds to identify it as the sound of paper burning. Then the smell came to me, of paint and ink being consumed by fire, in addition to the smell of dry paper. The room filled with these sensations until the head I worked was driven out. I ceased working on the face that had been consumed, the fire burned down, smells and sound gradually diminished and finally disappeared. I cracked open the window in spite of the cold, and went to bed.

In the morning I approached the water-colour drawing with great caution, not being entirely sure which things I had dreamed during the night and which I had experienced before going to sleep. As the sharp morning sun fell on the sketch, everything of the experience returned to me, and

with it came a frightful premonition I hesitated to interpret. What the evidence strongly suggested to me was the burning of manuscripts and artworks, the destruction that Will had occasionally threatened but never acted upon.

I had taken it as my responsibility to be the curator, the real preserver and disseminator of these treasures, and there could be no doubt in my heart that, as long as I lived, they were safe. But what of posterity? More than ever it was clear that the *Dante* plates needed to be in my safekeeping rather than that of John Linnell. But I shall not live too much longer. My solution, the understanding I had come to, with Will's blessing, was that Fred Tatham would be the next keeper. In spite of the change in my living arrangements, and in spite of some noisy tiffs while I lived with the Tathams, there was still great honest affection among us.

I decided what was required of me was to show my drawing of the face in the fire to Fred Tatham, tell him the sounds and smells that accompanied the vision, and, from his response, judge whether or not I could leave my trust in him unquestioned. I wrote requesting his company, and he suggested a time that was suitable, shortly after breakfast tea, when I could hope to be fresh and somewhat energetic. When he arrived, the strangest thing happened. It puzzles me still, though weeks have passed since it happened. We were chatting amiably, exchanging news about pieces that had recently appeared in the newspaper about William, as we drank from a second round of tea I had prepared.

Holding the drawing where it would catch the light, close to him, on my flattened hand, I remarked "Look what appeared to me the other evening . . ." I got no further before he cut in, quite upset.

"Catherine, you know you did that while you were living with us. This is not new. I remember it clearly. Perhaps you misplaced it in your moving and just recently came across it once again."

I was too stunned to reply, and he noted it.

"My dear," he said tenderly, "I wouldn't give it another thought. It's a lovely drawing, as I think I told you when you first showed it to me. I'm glad you have found it, and this time you must put it away safely, and mind where you put it, not to lose it again."

NIGHT-SONG at Charlton Street. We tumble and fall. I catch you. You lift me up. Finally at last we are in the present now, fully are we presences in one another. Trees file past us, peeling their greenness into our eyes. You lick my panther fur and I dissolve, partially, a wraith in the chimney, little more than sinuous warmth that writhes. Mine is still a soundless presence; yours a focusing bellow, round bell ever-struck. Your waves lap the air.

Only days are troublesome, contingent. I go through elaborate motions, an obeisance to sheer materiality: one cleans a room, perfunctory evidence.

Afternoons you appear briefly, as I admit to all who question, but only to promise an end to such days whose length regularly tries my faith. Nighttime freedom flies, filling all four corners with what love turned real. Small wonder that we overlap at all, you racing ahead, always branching and rooting, while I stand stock still against them.

Sources

The primary sources for this book are William Blake's poems, letters, and artworks, which I have carefully observed over time—some originals, some facsimiles, and some reproductions. Catherine participated directly in many of the illuminated books; indirectly in the poems and letters, as I have suggested.

Some secondary sources have been invaluable. First and foremost is the wonderful 1863 Blake biography by Alexander Gilchrist, especially in the 1880 edition published by his widow, Anne Gilchrist, with additions from both Dante Gabriel and William Rossetti. Copious illustrations from Blake's works, letters and remembrances from Blake's younger admirers are included.

Peter Ackroyd's 1995 Blake biography has been instructive, as have Geoffrey Keynes' edition of Mona Wilson's biography, also Kathleen Raine's. Bentley's Blake Records, *Bentley and Nurmi's* A Blake Bibliography, *Erdman's revised 1982 edition of* The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake, *and the facsimiles and reproductions of the William Blake Trust were constant companions and correctives in the adventure. Robert Essick's beautiful, well-illustrated volume* William Blake's Relief Inventions *was an inspiring example of the best that modern printing and scholarship can produce.*

Various exhibition catalogues were helpful regarding the Ancients: Robert Essick's "William Blake and his Contemporaries and Followers" from the Huntington in 1987, the catalogue for the Samuel Palmer show at the Victoria & Albert in 1978-79, and one entitled "Followers of Blake" from the Santa Barbara Museum in 1976.

Raymond Lister's lovely illustrated book, Edward Calvert *was helpful, as was his edition of* The Letters of Samuel Palmer.

Some serendipitous sources for background of the period were England in 1815, *a journal account of a trip made by the young Bostonian Joseph Ballard shortly after the War of 1812 and published in this country in 1913, and* Curiosities of London: Rare and Remarkable Objects of Interest in the Metropolis with Nearly Fifty Years' Personal Recollections *by John Timbs, published in London in 1855.*

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