

THE POET'S WIFE

Also by Judith Allnatt

A MILE OF RIVER

THE POET'S WIFE

Judith Allnatt



Doubleday

LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND • JOHANNESBURG

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
61–63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA
A Random House Group Company
www.rbooks.co.uk

First published in Great Britain
in 2010 by Doubleday
an imprint of Transworld Publishers

Copyright © Judith Allnatt 2010

Judith Allnatt has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

Illustrations of the hornet moth from John Clare's journal and of Northampton General Lunatic Asylum are reproduced with the kind permission of Northamptonshire Libraries and Information Service.

Poems reproduced with the kind permission of Curtis Brown Group Ltd, London on behalf of Eric Robinson 1984.

Copyright © Eric Robinson 1984

This book is a work of fiction and, except in the case of historical fact, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9780385613323

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition, including this condition, being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Addresses for Random House Group Ltd companies outside the UK can be found at: www.randomhouse.co.uk
The Random House Group Ltd Reg. No. 954009

The Random House Group Limited supports The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organization. All our titles that are printed on Greenpeace approved FSC certified paper carry the FSC logo. Our paper procurement policy can be found at www.rbooks.co.uk/environment

Typeset in 11/13pt Giovanni Book by
Kestrel Data, Exeter, Devon.
Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk.

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

For Janet: friend in need
and friend in deed.

The lunatic, the lover and the poet,
Are of imagination all compact

Shakespeare

Contents

PART ONE

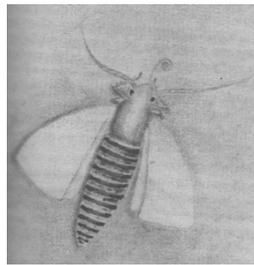
1	Names in Wood	13
2	Return of the Prodigal	27
3	A Cutting	49
4	Moon through Glass	65
5	Ghosts in the Hedges	79
6	Eel Pie	94
7	Meadow Flowers	111
8	Hay Carts and Iron Horses	132
9	The Ash Grove	145
10	Walk Lodge to Helpstone	165
11	Lords of Misrule	187
12	Golden Rings	211
13	Beggar's Market	228
14	The Wayfarer	245
15	The Holly and the Ivy	257
16	Starnels	268

PART TWO

17	Stork Beak Marks	291
18	The Doctor's Visit	309
19	Holy Water	325
20	County Town	349
21	Fit for a Lady	366
22	World Enough and Time	377
	Historical Note on John Clare	391
	Acknowledgements	395

Part I – July 1841



Names in Wood

After four years away, I found my husband sitting by the side of the road, picking gravel from his shoe and with his foot bloody from long walking. His clothes were crumpled from nights spent in the hedge or goodness knows where, and he had an old wide-awake hat on the back of his head like a gypsy.

'John,' I said. 'Are you coming home?'

When he heard his name he looked up at me, as if curious that I knew it, then held out his shoe as if to show me its parlous state: its sole loose and hanging from the upper. I bent and put it back upon his foot as gently as I could, for his stocking was brown with blood from many blisters. He watched my face with a look of puzzlement and when I stood and reached out my hand to help him up he refused it, levered himself up by his own efforts and began to walk away. His short figure and limping gait were so pitiful as he set off again along the empty road that my heart followed straight after him.

I turned back to Mr Ward and Charles, who were waiting in the cart, but they looked as nonplussed as I. Not wishing to lose him again, I followed down the road, calling, 'John! Wait!' and when I reached him I caught his hands fast in mine.

He pulled them away as if I had burnt him, saying, 'Are you drunk, woman? Leave me be!' and continued to shuffle along with his shoulders set as if he had been mortally offended.

Although my heart hurt to find him so estranged from me, when I had been missing him and thinking of him these past four years, I fell into step beside him and we walked awhile, until he seemed to forget that I was there. Soon we had gone such a way along the road that Mr Ward had to click his tongue to the horse and follow us. A strange procession we must have made to anyone watching: a broken-down journeyman, a woman trying to stop from wringing her hands and a cart stopping and starting behind them.

As we came to a place where tall elms grew on either side, shading the road, John's pace slowed even further and while still in the sun he stopped, as if loath to go on.

'Is this the way to Glinton?' he asked me, as if noticing me for the first time.

'It's the way to Northborough,' I said, trying out the sound of his home to see if it would ring in his ear with any echo of the past.

He looked at me blankly. There was no glimmer of knowledge in his bright blue eyes, though I searched them with my own and willed him to see his own Patty before him.

'Is this the way to Glinton?' he said again.

A sigh escaped my lips, for I knew very well why he would hanker so for Glinton and it affected me deeply.

'Yes,' I said. 'Glinton is near Northborough. It's on the same road.'

Mr Ward drew the horse in and the cart stood beside us.

'Are you tired?' I asked. 'Why not ride awhile with us?'

He looked ahead at the shadows that the trees' branches were casting on the road. It was full summer and they were thick-leaved, their shade deep. He took the arm I offered him. His hand was sun-browned and grimy against the paleness of my skin where my sleeve fell back, yet my arm was strong and firm, whereas his hand gripped tight as a baby's fist round a finger as he climbed up into the cart, so weak was he from long journeying.

Charles, whose eyes had been round as plates through all this strange exchange, moved along the wooden bench to make room for his father and stared in a most unseemly manner. He looked as if he would say something to greet him, but I shook my head in case he receive the same blank stare as I had and be hurt.

Mr Ward flicked the rein and we set off, John safely between Charles and myself. John took off his hat and held it on his knees and I took the chance to observe him.

Although he had been away from us a full four years, beneath the stains of the road he looked, if anything, younger. His cheeks were plump and his slight frame had filled out as if he had had good food and regular. His hair was still fair with no trace of grey, while I myself had a little at my temples, although it did not show much among the brown. He was wearing different clothes from those he went away in: a dun coat of good cloth, though lightened by dust and smeared with grass stains, and a yellow neckerchief. For the first time I noticed a bundle in his pocket, and knew from its square-cornered and lumpy shape that it was books tied in a handkerchief. At this I

could not forbear to smile, for only John would come away on a journey of nigh on eighty miles with no bottle for drink but with books for company.

We trotted on for a while, John staring at Mr Ward's back, which was indeed all he could see from where he was sitting. Suddenly he tapped him on the shoulder so that he glanced round.

'Aren't you from Helpstone, my native village?' he said. 'You look uncommonly like Mr Ward.'

A broad smile grew on Mr Ward's face. 'Indeed I am the very same and this is your wife, Patty, and your son, Charles.'

John looked quickly side to side at us, then back to Mr Ward. 'I thought at first that you must be his brother,' he said.

Mr Ward bellowed with laughter. 'Come, John, have I changed so much?' he said. 'My brother isn't half the man; I could pick him up under one arm by the time I was ten year old.' And we all laughed, for indeed it was true, his brother looked nothing like him, being red-haired and slim-built and cause for talk in the village when he was born.

We proceeded then in greater comfort for a while and I told John the news from Helpstone, our old home, with John nodding and smiling as if he remembered all and it was dear to him. Presently, Charles took his collection of pooty shells from his pocket, a handful of glossy shells some whorled in brown and green, some tiny and a whitish grey. John admired them as a good father should; my hand stole across and covered his and he did not push it away.

We began to pass through country close to Helpstone and I pointed out the places that would please him such as Royce's Wood, where the orchises grow, and the

windmill at Barnack that stands so tall and proud with the flat fields all around. Small things too, the Brimstones fluttering in the hedge flowers, eglantine and woodbine, hoping by this to draw him back to early memories as a stepping stone to the present. Indeed, a dreamy look did come into his eye and by and by he gripped my hand and turned to me.

'How is Mary?' he began.

My tongue dried in my mouth and I pulled my hand away. The old fit is still on him, I thought. 'She's been dead three years,' I said. 'You know that, John.'

He shook his head. 'That can't be, for I saw her this twelvemonth walking in the wood in Essex and with cornflowers in her hair.'

At this I fell silent, for I knew very well that she was dead and buried in Glinton churchyard, but I shivered at the thought of her walking abroad and wondered, as I often have, whether it is possible for the living to long so much for departed souls that they can conjure them to appear before them. Such, I knew, was the longing of my husband.

Fearfully, I asked him, 'Did you speak to her, John?' I saw Mr Ward's back stiffen as if he felt my discomfiture.

John shook his head and smiled. 'She slipped away from me and hid behind the trees for me to follow and catch her, as she did when we were children.'

'And did you . . . catch her?' I asked, though it was hard to do it.

'No, for one of the keepers came for me and she wouldn't show herself then but kept herself hid.'

John's mention of the keeper brought me back from my own concerns. 'Surely they treated you kindly, John?' I said. 'Dr Allen would have made certain of that.'

He frowned. 'Yes, if you think following a body and poking and prying into all his affairs is kind enough.'

I thought that, from what I'd seen, the following was probably to watch over him and make sure that he did himself no mischief.

John fidgeted and turned to look behind him as if he expected a keeper to come trotting after us any minute. After scanning the road, which was empty save for the nodding flowers and grasses and the small flocks of birds that scattered to the hedges as the cart passed by, he settled back in his seat.

'I gave them the slip,' he said, 'and went a-visiting Mrs Pratt and Mrs Fish's daughter at the Owl and Miss King, who I lent my Byron to . . .'

Mr Ward turned round to glance at me and I felt my colour rising. 'But Dr Allen fed and clothed you and tried his cures?' I said quickly.

At this second mention of Dr Allen, John fell silent and rubbed his chin, with the look of a boy caught stealing peas.

'You didn't tell him you were leaving,' I said flatly. 'You must write to Dr Allen directly when we get home.'

Charles looked up, hearing in my voice the tone I use when chastising the children, for, to tell the truth, John's remarks about one mistress and then another had stung me further. All were silent for a while.

At length, Charles fished in the pocket of his breeches and offered his father a sycamore key. Taking one himself, he held up his father's hand level with his own and showed him the game of dropping them to see which should twirl best and take longest to reach the floor of the cart.

I couldn't help but smile inwardly at this show of comradeship with his father, as if both should side

together against a strict parent, and so I let them be, hoping that John would become engrossed in the game and we should pass Ginton without mishap.

All was quiet and peaceful save for the clop of the horse and the clatter of the cart-wheels as we passed over the ruts. As we came out of a stand of trees, Ginton spire appeared in the distance, needle-sharp and white-gold in the bright sunshine. John opened his mouth to speak and I quickly turned away, as if keenly interested in the view in the opposite direction, though in truth it was nothing but a field of oats.

Nonetheless, the more I looked away from the spire, the more I felt the desire to look again. Such is the power of a vertical object in a horizontal landscape; it draws the eye as the pole draws a compass. Though I would not look round, I could feel John's eyes drawn to it, and I thought bitterly of this village where Mary Joyce had lived and gone to school alongside John. I fancied his heart as a compass needle drawn always back to Mary, just as a traveller, befogged in the fen, always scans for the thicker shape of the spire or listens for a muffled peal of bells.

I wished that there was another road we could take, out of sight of the spire, but it is visible for miles around, its tapered point pricking the very clouds. I thought of the orchard at home and how John liked to sit there beneath the apple boughs in the evening, and how sometimes I would join him when my tasks were done, and wished that we could be transported there in the twinkling of an eye rather than at a trotting pace. At this, a sigh escaped me, as, in truth, what I wished for was to fly not just across the fields and woods, but back in time to when John was not so ill and could still be relied upon and showed me tenderness. It would have been better if I had not allowed myself such musings, for they brought such

feelings up into my heart that I fear I began to lose my patience.

As we approached the turning for Glinton village, John broke off from his game with Charles and pulled at Mr Ward's sleeve. 'Turn here,' he entreated. 'Turn here. This is where I want to go.'

Mr Ward looked askance at me.

I said, 'But we're going home, John, home to Northborough, where all your children are waiting for you.'

He set his face with that stubborn look I know so well and said simply, 'I want to see Mary.'

My patience was breached and all my feelings of frustration with him welled up, the flood loosened by this slight to his own children. 'For God's sake, John, your own kin are waiting that you haven't seen in four years!'

At this, he stood up, nearly unseating Charles, and made as if he would get down from the cart and recommence his footsore wanderings. I pulled him back down and waved my hand to Mr Ward to continue straight on. 'We're going home,' I said, 'and if you cannot believe me that she is dead, I will track down the newspaper and you can read it with your own eyes.'

We had passed the turning and he twisted round to look back at it as if all his joy lay down that road. Mr Ward clicked his tongue to the horse and we continued at a smarter pace until the turning was out of view. John reluctantly turned away and sat straight again. He put his arm round Charles as if for comfort.

'It is true, John,' I said in a gentler manner.

'It is a lie,' he said and stared fixedly at Mr Ward's back.

* * *

Is it possible to be jealous of the dead? She is gone; her bones lie in Ginton churchyard, six feet deep, with the earth pressing on the lid of her coffin. Yet I know in John's mind she walks and talks as fresh and scented as a flower after rain.

I know she is dead; I mind well enough walking to Ginton a year after her death to see the grave for myself. The thought, even now, gives me a guilty shiver. What was I thinking? I need not pretend. I know very well that I was thinking that even after the newspaper report of her death, even after the neighbours' tales of her funeral, I still had to see for myself where she was laid to rest. I remember I set out early on a summer's morning, my dress soaking up the dew as I walked the field's edge. The vision crossed my mind of my John as a child walking to school at Ginton from his home in Helpstone and Mary walking her shorter walk to the schoolroom, which was in the vestry of the church, and now I was walking to Ginton from Northborough and it was as if the three of us were all walking towards the spire and would all converge at that point to face one another. It was as though I had slipped through time into a place where I had no business – John and Mary's childhood.

On reaching St Benedict's at Ginton I entered through the gate, walked a little way into the centre of the churchyard and looked up at the spire. It loomed over me, its height dizzying, its tapering point drawing the eye imperiously to heaven. The sturdy weathercock, from this distance, seemed a flimsy thing as it swung in the slightest of breezes. It is said that its six-pound weight balances on a single glass marble and I wondered that it should still hold there in the face of wind and weather. Though worn pea-green it never has blown down, but in a storm is said to spin back and forth, as if our Maker plays with it a little,

allowing it to remain because the spire has been raised by mortals in his praise.

Though the stone of the building shines golden in the early-morning sun, the gargoyles at the roof corners grimace horribly. All save for one, which turns its back and shows its nether regions. I had heard before of this gargoyle, which is said to demonstrate the mason's opinion of the low payment he had received. Children point at it and lewd youths snigger and mutter the word 'arse' behind their hands, but looking at its grossness it seemed to me to speak of man's beastly side and to be set there to remind the parish of their sinful thoughts and the pains of damnation the Church says are set aside for those who cannot control them. I turned my eyes earthwards and began to walk the paths of the churchyard.

I found her grave; the stone still new and white, the hummock still rounded, not flattened by the falling-in that time wreaks on the dead. The inscription read *Mary Joyce, died 1838, age 41*, the lettering etched deep and clear, with carved oak boughs crossed above to make her resting place a bower. And it is true I felt the pinch of jealousy even then, for I knew that if John were there to see it he would weep. I tried to bring thoughts of the Lord to my mind and to imagine her at peace at last with her hands across her breast and the marks of pennies on her eyelids. Then I thought on the facts of the case: that she had died by fire when a cinder had caught on to her cotton dress and there was no one there to help her, and that her body was fixed after death with her hands plucking at herself in an effort to tear off her burning garments; and I felt a terrible pity thinking of her in her casket in the very shape of her agony and I was awfully ashamed. I hurried towards the church to seek some peace within.

I entered the church porch and stood at the dark oak

door, unsure whether to try the handle, it being a Saturday and no sign of clergy present. With a shock I saw that, on either side of me, what I had at first taken for two rough-hewn pillars were in fact two huge stone figures. A man and a woman, they stood facing into the porch. The woman was in a long shift and wimple and with her hands clasped in front of her. The man carried bow and arrows and a horn: a forester. The figures themselves were imposing as they stood taller than I, but chiefly I had drawn in my breath because they *hadn't any faces*. Mask-like, where their faces should have been there were only blank ovals of stone, their lineaments blunted by time and now marked only by small random pits in the surface. As soon as I recognized these signs of weathering I realized that the figures were tomb tops, brought in from outside to stand there like sentinels. They faced each other, expressionless, their judgement on those who passed over the threshold kept secret and unmarked. With a shiver I moved forward, grasped and turned the iron ring and entered the church.

I slipped into a pew at the back, put my head down and closed my eyes tight to pray. I breathed in the smell of damp and old wood and, although no prayer would come, the coolness calmed me. All was silent and the air felt as though it had not been disturbed for some days. At length I rose and went slowly towards the vestry. I was sure that no one else was in the church, but I felt eyes upon me as I walked up the aisle and, glancing up, saw that not only angels but also hobgoblins and beasties were sculpted holding up the corbels. I didn't know of which I was more afraid, the demons or the angels, but unable to stop myself I stepped aside and went in at the vestry door.

I had not realized that the vestry was still used as a schoolroom, so where I had expected to find only

cassocks and candles I faced instead the very scene that I had imagined in my dreams so many times. At the far end, sun streamed in through an arched, leaded window to fill the whitewashed room with light. Two rows of stools and desks faced a larger desk with a chair set behind it. Beneath the window was a large oak chest, the wood black with age and the lid with thick iron hasps. The room smelt of candle wax and ink. I walked to the large desk and stood facing the room. I rested my fingertips on the cold wood and it was as if the room was filled with childish giggles and whisperings and John and Mary were sitting at the back with their heads bent over the same book. As though in a dream, I walked along the row of desks to the back, my skirts brushing against the tiny stools, and as I went I read the angular, scratched letters on the lids – *Peter Thresher 1798; Tom Wildern of Glington; Sarah Missell will be caught* – until at last I found what I knew I would, and in a familiar hand that had taken the time to add curlicues to the letters, *John Clare loves Mary Joyce*.

John Clare loves Mary Joyce; it ran like a refrain in my head. I ran my fingers back and forth across the surface as if I would rub it out. *But she did not marry you*, I thought in bitterness, and then, far worse, *and now she is dead*. I pulled my hand quickly from the wood.

As if there must be worse still to come, I began to wonder what lay in the oak chest – maybe school books with notes passed between them? – and once I had started to wonder, I needs must open it and see.

There was no key in the lock but the hasp hung loose and I saw that all I need do was pull it free and lift the lid. The metal was bumpy and dark with rust and the lid heavy, but I put my shoulder to it and heaved it open. Inside were many fusty books with dates upon the covers, which afterwards I thought to be the parish records, but

at the time I had eyes for only one book and that was big and black, its pages edged in silver and its title tooled in brightest gold. The words 'Holy Bible' seemed to burn out of the black and I dropped the lid of the chest. The noise echoed in the roof like a clap of thunder and I picked up my skirts and ran down the nave, out of the church and back along the path as if I had the finger of God upon my back.

As I passed through the churchyard gate, my shawl became entangled in the latch and my fingers shook as I picked the knot apart to let me free. The gate clanged shut behind me and I fancied the gargoyles laughing at my struggles and walked away fast, back the way I'd come. A woman at the pump gave me good morning but I had not the breath to answer her so I nodded and walked on. She looked at me curiously and I made myself slow a little and find a sedate pace more becoming to my age and stature.

As I escaped the village and gained the quiet of the field track, my heart began to slow at last and the whisper of the oats and the nodding of the poppies began to calm me and give me leave to think. Well, I thought, I have done a bad thing in coming here today and I have had my punishment. The old adage has it that those who listen at keyholes find out no good and I had listened at the keyhole and heard the voices of a world in which I had no part.

I realized, with a heavy heart, that a dead woman is a fearsome rival, for over time her absence will surely smooth out all her faults and the rosy glow of memory illuminate her virtues until she becomes the very epitome of a lost love. I am a handsome woman, many have said it: I have straight and regular features, clear grey eyes, thick hair and a firm figure, but I am forty-one summers old and each year adds another line, a little grey.

The Poet's Wife

Mary, though, will always be untouched by time. John can call her to mind like a magic lantern show: the smocked twelve-year-old playing jacks with him after school; the sixteen-year-old with a mouth as sweet as blackberries; the twenty-year-old he hankered for and whose father would not let him near. She will never be over worn with tiredness, never sharp-tongued, never ill or pale, never stale-breathed or with the sweat of labour on her. She will never be old.