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Opening Extract from...

HAMNET

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Published By **Tinder Press**, and
imprint of **Headline Publishing Group**

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I



boy is coming down a flight of stairs.

The passage is narrow and twists back on itself. He takes each step slowly, sliding himself along the wall, his boots meeting each tread with a thud.

Near the bottom, he pauses for a moment, looking back the way he has come. Then, suddenly resolute, he leaps the final three stairs, as is his habit. He stumbles as he lands, falling to his knees on the flagstone floor.

It is a close, windless day in late summer, and the downstairs room is slashed by long strips of light. The sun glowers at him from outside, the windows latticed slabs of yellow, set into the plaster.

He gets up, rubbing his legs. He looks one way, up the stairs; he looks the other, unable to decide which way he should turn.

The room is empty, the fire ruminating in its grate, orange embers below soft, spiralling smoke. His injured kneecaps throb in time with his heartbeat. He stands with one hand resting on the latch of the door to the stairs, the scuffed leather tip of his boot raised, poised for motion, for flight. His hair, light-coloured, almost gold, rises up from his brow in tufts.

There is no one here.

He sighs, drawing in the warm, dusty air and moves through the room, out of the front door and on to the street. The noise of barrows, horses, vendors, people calling to each other, a man hurling a sack from an upper window doesn't reach him. He wanders along the front of the house and into the neighbouring doorway.

The smell of his grandparents' home is always the same: a mix of woodsmoke, polish, leather, wool. It is similar yet indefinably different from the adjoining two-roomed apartment, built by his grandfather in a narrow gap next to the larger house, where he lives with his mother and sisters. Sometimes he cannot understand why this might be. The two dwellings are, after all, separated by only a thin wattled wall but the air in each place is of a different ilk, a different scent, a different temperature.

This house whistles with draughts and eddies of air, with the tapping and hammering of his grandfather's workshop, with the raps and calls of customers at the window, with the noise and welter of the courtyard out the back, with the sound of his uncles coming and going.

But not today. The boy stands in the passageway, listening for signs of occupation. He can see from here that the workshop, to his right, is empty, the stools at the benches vacant, the tools idle on the counters, a tray of abandoned gloves, like handprints, left out for all to see. The vending window is shut and bolted tight. There is no one in the dining hall, to his left. A stack of napkins is piled on the long table, an unlit candle, a heap of feathers. Nothing more.

He calls out, a cry of greeting, a questioning sound. Once, twice, he makes this noise. Then he cocks his head, listening for a response.

Nothing. Just the creaking of beams expanding gently in the sun, the sigh of air passing under doors, between rooms, the swish of linen drapes, the crack of the fire, the indefinable noise of a house at rest, empty.

His fingers tighten around the iron of the door handle. The

heat of the day, even this late, causes sweat to express itself from the skin of his brow, down his back. The pain in his knees sharpens, twinges, then fades again.

The boy opens his mouth. He calls the names, one by one, of all the people who live here, in this house. His grandmother. The maid. His uncles. His aunt. The apprentice. His grandfather. The boy tries them all, one after another. For a moment, it crosses his mind to call his father's name, to shout for him, but his father is miles and hours and days away, in London, where the boy has never been.

But where, he would like to know, are his mother, his older sister, his grandmother, his uncles? Where is the maid? Where is his grandfather, who tends not to leave the house by day, who is usually to be found in the workshop, harrying his apprentice or reckoning his takings in a ledger? Where is everyone? How can both houses be empty?

He moves along the passageway. At the door to the workshop, he stops. He throws a quick glance over his shoulder, to make sure nobody is there, then steps inside.

His grandfather's glove workshop is a place he is rarely allowed to enter. Even to pause in the doorway is forbidden. Don't stand there idling, his grandfather will roar. Can't a man do an honest day's work without people stopping to gawk at him? Have you nothing better to do than loiter there catching flies?

Hamnet's mind is quick: he has no trouble understanding the schoolmasters' lessons. He can grasp the logic and sense of what he is being told, and he can memorise readily. Recalling verbs and grammar and tenses and rhetoric and numbers and calculations comes to him with an ease that can, on occasion, attract the envy of other boys. But his is a mind also easily

distracted. A cart going past in the street during a Greek lesson will draw his attention away from his slate to wonderings as to where the cart might be going and what it could be carrying and how about that time his uncle gave him and his sisters a ride on a haycart, how wonderful that was, the scent and prick of new-cut hay, the wheels tugged along to the rhythm of the tired mare's hoofs. More than twice in recent weeks he has been whipped at school for not paying attention (his grandmother has said if it happens once more, just once, she will send word of it to his father). The schoolmasters cannot understand it. Hamnet learns quickly, can recite by rote, but he will not keep his mind on his work.

The noise of a bird in the sky can make him cease speaking, mid-utterance, as if the very heavens have struck him deaf and dumb at a stroke. The sight of a person entering a room, out of the corner of his eye, can make him break off whatever he is doing – eating, reading, copying out his schoolwork – and gaze at them as if they have some important message just for him. He has a tendency to slip the bounds of the real, tangible world around him and enter another place. He will sit in a room in body, but in his head he is somewhere else, someone else, in a place known only to him. Wake up, child, his grandmother will shout, snapping her fingers at him. Come back, his older sister, Susanna, will hiss, flicking his ear. Pay attention, his schoolmasters will yell. Where did you go? Judith will be whispering to him, when he finally re-enters the world, when he comes to, when he glances around to find that he is back, in his house, at his table, surrounded by his family, his mother eyeing him, half smiling, as if she knows exactly where he's been.

In the same way, now, walking into the forbidden space of the glove workshop, Hamnet has lost track of what he is meant to be doing. He has momentarily slipped free of his moorings, of the fact that Judith is unwell and needs someone to care for her, that he is meant to be finding their mother or grandmother or anyone else who might know what to do.

Skins hang from a rail. Hamnet knows enough to recognise the rust-red spotted hide of a deer, the delicate and supple kidskin, the smaller pelts of squirrels, the coarse and bristling boarskin. As he moves nearer to them, the skins start to rustle and stir on their hangings, as if some life might yet be left in them, just a little, just enough for them to hear him coming. Hamnet extends a finger and touches the goat hide. It is unaccountably soft, like the brush of river weed against his legs when he swims on hot days. It sways gently to and fro, legs splayed, stretched out, as if in flight, like a bird or a ghoul.

Hamnet turns, surveys the two seats at the workbench: the padded leather one worn smooth by the rub of his grandfather's breeches, and the hard wooden stool for Ned, the apprentice. He sees the tools, suspended from hooks on the wall above the workbench. He is able to identify those for cutting, those for stretching, those for pinning and stitching. He sees that the narrower of the glove stretchers – used for women – is out of place, left on the bench where Ned works with bent head and curved shoulders and anxious, nimble fingers. Hamnet knows that his grandfather needs little provocation to yell at the boy, perhaps worse, so he picks up the glove stretcher, weighing its warm wooden heft, and replaces it on its hook.

He is just about to slide out the drawer where the twists of thread are kept, and the boxes of buttons – carefully, carefully, because he knows the drawer will squeak – when a noise, a slight shifting or scraping, reaches his ears.

Within seconds, Hamnet has darted out, along the passageway and into the yard. His task returns to him. What is he doing, fiddling in the workshop? His sister is unwell: he is meant to be finding someone to help.

He bangs open, one by one, the doors to the cookhouse, the brewhouse, the washhouse. All of them empty, their interiors dark and cool. He calls out again, slightly hoarse this time, his throat scraped with the shouting. He leans against the cookhouse wall and kicks at a nutshell, sending it skittering across the yard. He is utterly confounded to be so alone. Someone ought to be here; someone always is here. Where can they be? What must he do? How can they all be out? How can his mother and grandmother not be in the house, as they usually are, heaving open the doors of the oven, stirring a pot over the fire? He stands in the yard, looking about himself, at the door to the passageway, at the door to the brewhouse, at the door to their apartment. Where should he go? Whom should he call on for help? And where is everyone?

Every life has its kernel, its hub, its epicentre, from which everything flows out, to which everything returns. This moment is the absent mother's: the boy, the empty house, the deserted yard, the unheard cry. Him standing here, at the back of the house, calling for the people who had fed him, swaddled him, rocked him to sleep, held his hand as he took his first steps, taught him to use a spoon, to blow on broth before he ate it,

to take care crossing the street, to let sleeping dogs lie, to swill out a cup before drinking, to stay away from deep water.

It will lie at her very core, for the rest of her life.

Hamnet scuffs his boots in the grit of the yard. He can see the remains of a game he and Judith had been playing not long ago: the lengths of twine tied to pine cones to be pulled and swung for the kitchen cat's kittens. Small creatures they are, with faces like pansies and soft pads on their paws. The cat went into a barrel in the storeroom to have them and hid there for weeks. Hamnet's grandmother looked everywhere for the litter, intending to drown them all, as is her custom, but the cat thwarted her, keeping her babies secret, safe, and now they are half grown, two of them, running about the place, climbing up sacks, chasing feathers and wool scraps and stray leaves. Judith cannot be parted from them for long. She usually has one in her apron pocket, a tell-tale bulge, a pair of peaked ears giving her away, making their grandmother shout and threaten the waterbutt. Hamnet's mother, however, whispers to them that the kittens are too big for their grandmother to drown. 'She couldn't do it, now,' she says to them, in private, wiping tears from Judith's horrified face. 'She wouldn't have the stomach for it – they would struggle, you see, they would fight.'

Hamnet wanders over to the abandoned pine cones, their strings trailed into the trodden earth of the yard. The kittens are nowhere to be seen. He nudges a pine cone with his toe and it rolls away from him in an uneven arch.

He looks up at the houses, the many windows of the big one and the dark doorway of his own. Normally, he and Judith

would be delighted to find themselves alone. He would, this very moment, be trying to persuade her to climb on to the cookhouse roof with him, so that they might reach the boughs of the plum tree just over the neighbour's wall. They are filled, crammed, with plums, their red-gold jackets near to bursting with ripeness; Hamnet has eyed them from an upper window in his grandparents' house. If this were a normal day, he would be giving Judith a boost on to the roof so that she could fill her pockets with stolen fruit, despite her qualms and protestations. She doesn't like to do anything dishonest or forbidden, so guileless is her nature, but can usually be persuaded with a few words from Hamnet.

Today, though, as they played with the kittens who escaped an early demise, she said she had a headache, a pain in her throat, she felt cold, then she felt hot, and she has gone into the house to lie down.

Hamnet goes back through the door to the main house and along the passage. He is just about to go out into the street when he hears a noise. It is a click or a shift, a minute sound, but it is the definite noise of another human being.

'Hello?' Hamnet calls. He waits. Nothing. Silence presses back at him from the dining hall and the parlour beyond. 'Who's there?'

For a moment, and just for a moment, he entertains the notion that it might be his father, returned from London, to surprise them – it has happened before. His father will be there, beyond that door, perhaps hiding as a game, as a ruse. If Hamnet walks into the room, his father will leap out; he will have gifts stowed in his bag, in his purse; he will smell of horses, of hay, of many days on the road; he will put his

arms around his son and Hamnet will press his cheek to the rough, chafing fastenings of his father's jerkin.

He knows it won't be his father. He knows it, he does. His father would respond to a repeated call, would never hide himself away in an empty house. Even so, when Hamnet walks into the parlour, he feels the falling, filtering sensation of disappointment to see his grandfather there, beside the low table.

The room is filled with gloom, coverings pulled over most of the windows. His grandfather is standing with his back towards him, in a crouched position, fumbling with something: papers, a cloth bag, counters of some sort. There is a pitcher on the table, and a cup. His grandfather's hand meanders through these objects, his head bent, his breath coming in wheezing bursts.

Hamnet gives a polite cough.

His grandfather wheels around, his face wild, furious, his arm flailing through the air, as if warding off an assailant. 'Who's there?' he cries. 'Who is that?'

'It's me.'

'Who?'

'Me.' Hamnet steps towards the narrow shaft of light slanting in through the window. 'Hamnet.'

His grandfather sits down with a thud. 'You scared the wits out of me, boy,' he cries. 'Whatever do you mean, creeping about like that?'

'I'm sorry,' Hamnet says. 'I was calling and calling but no one answered. Judith is—'

'They've gone out,' his grandfather speaks over him, with a curt flick of his wrist. 'What do you want with all those women anyway?' He seizes the neck of the pitcher and aims

it towards the cup. The liquid – ale, Hamnet thinks – slops out precipitously, some into the cup and some on to the papers on the table, causing his grandfather to curse, then dab at them with his sleeve. For the first time, it occurs to Hamnet that his grandfather might be drunk.

‘Do you know where they have gone?’ Hamnet asks.

‘Eh?’ his grandfather says, still mopping his papers. His anger at their spoiling seems to unsheathe itself and stretch out from him, like a rapier. Hamnet can feel the tip of it wander about the room, seeking an opponent, and he thinks for a moment of his mother’s hazel strip, and the way it pulls itself towards water, except he is not an underground stream and his grandfather’s anger is not like the quivering divining rod at all. It is cutting, sharp, unpredictable. Hamnet has no idea what will happen next, or what he should do.

‘Don’t stand there gaping,’ his grandfather hisses. ‘Help me.’

Hamnet shuffles forward a step, then another. He is wary, his father’s words circling his mind: Stay away from your grandfather when he is in one of his black humours. Be sure to stand clear of him. Stay well back, do you hear?

His father had said this to him on his last visit, when they had been helping unload a cart from the tannery. John, his grandfather, had dropped a bundle of skins into the mud and, in a sudden fit of temper, had hurled a paring-knife at the yard wall. His father had immediately pulled Hamnet back, behind him, out of the way, but John had barged past them into the house without a word. His father had taken Hamnet’s face in both of his hands, fingers curled in at the nape of his neck, his gaze steady and searching. He’ll not touch your sisters but it’s you I worry for, he had muttered, his brow

puckering. You know the humour I mean, don't you? Hamnet had nodded but wanted the moment to be prolonged, for his father to keep holding his head like that: it gave him a sensation of lightness, of safety, of being entirely known and treasured. At the same time, he was aware of a curdling unease swilling about inside him, like a meal his stomach didn't want. He thought of the snip and snap of words that punctured the air between his father and grandfather, the way his father continually reached to loosen his collar when seated at table with his parents. Swear to me, his father had said, as they stood in the yard, his voice hoarse. Swear it. I need to know you'll be safe when I'm not here to see to it.

Hamnet believes he is keeping his word. He is well back. He is at the other side of the fireplace. His grandfather couldn't reach him here, even if he tried.

His grandfather is draining his cup with one hand and shaking the drops off a sheet of paper with the other. 'Take this,' he orders, holding out the page.

Hamnet bends forward, not moving his feet, and takes it with the very tips of his fingers. His grandfather's eyes are slitted, watchful; his tongue pokes out of the side of his mouth. He sits in his chair, hunched: an old, sad toad on a stone.

'And this.' His grandfather holds out another paper.

Hamnet bends forward in the same way, keeping the necessary distance. He thinks of his father, how he would be proud of him, how he would be pleased.

Quick as a fox, his grandfather makes a lunge. Everything happens so fast that, afterwards, Hamnet won't be sure in what sequence it all occurred: the page swings to the floor between them, his grandfather's hand seizes him by the wrist,

then the elbow, hauling him forward, into the gap, the space his father had told him to observe, and his other hand, which still holds the cup, is coming up, fast. Hamnet is aware of streaks in his vision – red, orange, the colours of fire, streaming in from the corner of his eye – before he feels the pain. It is a sharp, clubbed, jabbing pain. The rim of the cup has struck him just below the eyebrow.

‘That’ll teach you,’ his grandfather is saying, in a calm voice, ‘to creep up on people.’

Tears burst forth from Hamnet’s eyes, both of them, not just the injured one.

‘Crying are you? Like a little maid? You’re as bad as your father,’ his grandfather says, with disgust, releasing him. Hamnet springs backwards, thwacking his shin on the side of the parlour bed. ‘Always crying and whining and complaining,’ his grandfather mutters. ‘No backbone. No sense. That was always his problem. Couldn’t stick at anything.’

Hamnet is running back outside, along the street, wiping at his face, dabbing the blood with his sleeve. He lets himself in through his own front door, up the stairs, to the upper room, where a figure lies on the pallet next to their parents’ big curtained bed. The figure is dressed – a brown smock, a white bonnet, the strings of which are untied and straggle down her neck – and is lying on top of the sheets. She has kicked off her shoes, which lie, inverted, like a pair of empty pods, beside her.

‘Judith,’ the boy says, and touches her hand. ‘Are you feeling any better?’

The girl’s lids lift. She stares at her brother, for a moment, as if from a great distance, then shuts her eyes again. ‘I’m sleeping,’ she murmurs.

She has the same heart-shaped face as him, the same peaked brow, where the same corn-coloured hair grows upwards. The eyes that fixed so briefly on his face are the same colour – a warm amber, flecked with gold – the same set as his own. There is a reason for this: they share a birthday, just as they shared their mother's womb. The boy and the girl are twins, born within minutes of each other. They are as alike as if they had been born in the same caul.

He closes his fingers about hers – the same nails, the same shaped knuckles, although his are bigger, wider, grimier – and he tries to flatten the thought that hers feel slick and hot.

'How are you?' he says. 'Better?'

She stirs. Her fingers curl into his. Her chin lifts, then dips. There is, the boy sees, a swelling at the base of her throat. And another where her shoulder meets her neck. He stares at them. A pair of quail's eggs, under Judith's skin. Pale, ovoid, nestled there, as if waiting to hatch. One at her neck, one at her shoulder.

She is saying something, her lips parting, her tongue moving inside her mouth.

'What did you say?' he asks, bending nearer.

'Your face,' she is saying. 'What happened to your face?'

He puts a hand to his brow, feeling the swelling there, the wet of new blood. 'Nothing,' he says. 'It was nothing. Listen,' he says, more urgently, 'I'm going to find the physician. I won't be long.'

She says something else.

'Mamma?' he repeats. 'She – she is coming. She is not far away.'

*

She is, in fact, more than a mile away.

Agnes has a patch of land at Hewlands, leased from her brother, stretching from the house where she was born to the forest. She keeps bees here, in hemp-woven skeps, which hum with industrious and absorbed life; there are rows of herbs, flowers, plants, stems that wind up supporting twigs. Agnes's witch garden, her stepmother calls it, with a roll of her eyes.

Agnes can be seen, most weeks, moving up and down the rows of these plants, pulling up weeds, laying her hand to the coils of her hives, pruning stems here and there, secreting certain blooms, leaves, pods, petals, seeds in a leather bag at her hip.

Today she has been called there by her brother, who dispatched the shepherd's boy to tell her that something was amiss with the bees – they have left the hive and are massing in the trees.

Agnes is circling the skeps, listening for whatever the bees are telling her; she is eyeing the swarm in the orchard, a blackish stain spread throughout the branches that vibrates and quivers with outrage. Something has upset them. The weather, a change in temperature, or has someone disturbed the hive? One of the children, some escaped sheep, her stepmother?

She slides her hand up and under, into the skep, past its lip, through the remaining coating of bees. She is cool in a shift, under the dark, river-coloured shade of the trees, her thick braid of hair pinned to the top of her head, hidden under a white coif. No bee-keeper veil covers her face – she never wears one. If you came close enough, you would see that her lips are moving, murmuring small sounds and clicks to the insects that circle her head, alight on her sleeve, blunder into her face.

She brings a honeycomb out of the skep and squats to

examine it. Its surface is covered, teeming, with something that appears to be one moving entity: brown, banded with gold, wings shaped like tiny hearts. It is hundreds of bees, crowded together, clinging to their comb, their prize, their work.

She lifts a bundle of smouldering rosemary and waves it gently over the comb, the smoke leaving a trail in the still August air. The bees lift, in unison, to swarm above her head, a cloud with no edges, an airborne net that keeps casting and casting itself.

The pale wax is scraped, carefully, carefully, into a basket; the honey leaves the comb with a cautious, near reluctant drop. Slow as sap, orange-gold, scented with the sharp tang of thyme and the floral sweetness of lavender, it falls into the pot Agnes holds out. A thread of honey stretches from comb to pot, widening, twisting.

There is a sensation of change, an agitation of air, as if a bird has passed silently overhead. Agnes, still crouching, looks up. The movement causes her hand to waver and honey drips to her wrist, trails over her fingers, down the side of the pot. Agnes frowns, puts down the honeycomb, and stands, licking her fingertips.

She takes in the thatched eaves of Hewlands, to her right, the white scree of cloud overhead, the restless branches of the forest, to her left, the swarm of bees in the apple trees. In the distance, her second-youngest brother is driving sheep along the bridle path, a switch in his hand, the dog darting towards and away from the flock. Everything is as it should be. Agnes stares for a moment at the jerky stream of sheep, the skitter of their feet, their draggled, mud-crusting fleeces. A bee lands on her cheek; she fans it away.

Later, and for the rest of her life, she will think that if she had left there and then, if she had gathered her bags, her plants, her honey, and taken the path home, if she had heeded her abrupt, nameless unease, she might have changed what happened next. If she had left her swarming bees to their own devices, their own ends, instead of working to coax them back into their hives, she might have headed off what was coming.

She doesn't, however. She dabs at the sweat on her brow, her neck, tells herself not to be foolish. She places a lid on the full pot, she wraps up the honeycomb in a leaf, she presses her hands to the next skep, to read it, to understand it. She leans against it, feeling its rumbling, vibrating interior; she senses its power, its potency, like an incoming storm.

The boy, Hamnet, is trotting along the street, around a corner, dodging a horse that stands, patient, between the shafts of a cart, around a group of men gathered outside the guildhall, leaning towards each other with serious faces. He passes a woman with a baby in her arms, imploring an older child to walk faster, to keep up, a man hitting the haunches of a donkey, a dog that glances up from whatever it is eating to watch Hamnet as he runs. The dog barks once, in sharp admonishment, then returns to its gnawing.

Hamnet arrives at the house of the physician – he has asked directions from the woman with the baby – and he bangs on the door. He registers, momentarily, the shape of his fingers, his nails, and looking at them brings Judith's to mind; he bangs harder. He thuds, he thunders, he shouts.

The door is swung open and the narrow, vexed face of a woman appears around it. 'Whatever are you doing?' she cries,

shaking a cloth at him, as if to waft him away, like an insect. 'That's a racket loud enough to wake the dead. Be off with you.'

She goes to shut the door but Hamnet leaps forward. 'No,' he says. 'Please. I'm sorry, madam. I need the physician. We need him. My sister – she is unwell. Can he come to us? Can he come now?'

The woman holds the door firm in her reddened hand but looks at Hamnet with care, with attention, as if reading the seriousness of the problem in his features. 'He's not here,' she says eventually. 'He's with a patient.'

Hamnet has to swallow, hard. 'When will he be back, if you please?'

The pressure on the door is lessening. He steps one foot into the house, leaving the other behind him.

'I couldn't say.' She looks him up and down, at the encroaching foot in her hallway. 'What ails your sister?'

'I don't know.' He tries to think back to Judith, the way she looked as she lay on the blankets, her eyes closed, her skin flushed and yet pale. 'She has a fever. She has taken to her bed.'

The woman frowns. 'A fever? Has she buboes?'

'Buboes?'

'Lumps. Under the skin. On her neck, under her arms.'

Hamnet stares at her, at the small pleat of skin between her brows, at the rim of her cap, how it has rubbed a raw patch beside her ear, at the wiry coils of hair escaping at the back. He thinks of the word 'buboes', its vaguely vegetal overtones, how its bulging sound mimics the thing it describes. A cold fear rinses down through his chest, encasing his heart in an instant, crackling frost.

The woman's frown deepens. She places her hand in the centre of Hamnet's chest and propels him back, out of her house.

'Go,' she says, her face pinched. 'Go home. Now. Leave.' She goes to close the door but then, through the narrowest crack, says, not unkindly, 'I will ask the physician to call. I know who you are. You're the glover's boy, aren't you? The grandson. From Henley Street. I will ask him to come by your house, when he returns. Go now. Don't stop on the way back.' As an afterthought, she adds, 'God speed to you.'

He runs back. The world seems more glaring, the people louder, the streets longer, the colour of the sky an invasive, glancing blue. The horse still stands at its cart; the dog is now curled up on a doorstep. Buboos, he thinks again. He has heard the word before. He knows what it means, what it denotes.

Surely not, he is thinking, as he turns into his street. It cannot be. It cannot. That – he will not name it, he will not allow the word to form, even inside his head – hasn't been known in this town for years.

Someone will be home, he knows, by the time he gets to the front door. By the time he opens it. By the time he crosses the threshold. By the time he calls out, to someone, anyone. There will be an answer. Someone will be there.

Unbeknown to him, he passed the maid, both his grandparents and his older sister on his trip to the physician's house.

His grandmother, Mary, had been coming along an alleyway, down near the river, making deliveries, her stick held out to ward off the advances of a particularly peevish cockerel, Susanna behind her. Susanna had been brought along to carry Mary's

basket of gloves – deerskin, kidskin, squirrel-lined, wool-lined, embroidered, plain. 'I don't for the life of me know why,' Mary had been saying, as Hamnet flashed unseen past the end of the alley, 'you cannot at the very least look people in the eye when they greet you. These are some of your grandfather's highest paying customers and a shred of courtesy wouldn't go amiss. Now I do really believe that . . .' Susanna had trailed in her wake, rolling her eyes, lugging the basket filled with gloves. Like severed hands, she was thinking, as she let her grandmother's voice be blotted out by the sound of her own sigh, by the sight of a slice of sky cutting through the building tops.

John, Hamnet's grandfather, had been among the men outside the guildhall. He had left the parlour and his calculations while Hamnet had been upstairs with Judith, and had been standing with his back to Hamnet as the boy ran for the physician. If the boy had turned his head as he passed, he would have seen his grandfather pushing his way into this group, leaning towards the other men, gripping their reluctant arms, urging them, teasing them, exhorting them to come with him to a tavern.

John hadn't been invited to this meeting but had heard that it was happening so had come along in the hope of catching the men before they dispersed. He wants nothing more than to reinstate himself as a man of consequence and influence, to regain the status he once had. He can do it, he knows he can. All he needs is the ear of these men, whom he has known for years, who know him, who could vouch for his industry, his loyalty to this town. Or, if nothing else, a pardon or a blind eye from the guild and the town authorities. He was once bailiff, and then a high alderman; he used to sit in the front

pew of the church and wear a scarlet robe. Have these men forgotten that? How can they not have invited him to this meeting? He used to have influence – he used to rule over them all. He used to be someone. And now he is reduced to living on whatever coin his eldest can send back from London (and what an infuriating youth he had been, hanging about the market square, squandering his time; who would have thought he would amount to anything?).

John's business still thrives, after a fashion, because people will always need gloves, and if these men know of his secret dealings in the wool trade, his summons for not attending church and fines for dumping waste in the street, so be it. John can take in his stride their disapproval, their fines and their demands, their snide mutterings about the ruination of his family, the exclusion from guild meetings. His house is one of the finest in the town: there is always that. What John cannot bear is that not one of them will take a drink with him, will break bread at his table, will warm themselves at his hearth. Outside the guildhall, the men avoid his eye, continue their conversation. They don't listen to his prepared speech about the reliability of the glove trade, about his successes, his triumphs, his invitations to a tavern, to eat dinner at his house. They nod distantly; they turn away. One pats his arm, says, aye, John, aye.

So he goes to the tavern alone. Just for a while. Nothing wrong with a man's own company. He will sit here, in the half-light, like that of dusk, a candle stub on the table before him, and watch as stray flies circle and circle in its light.

Judith is lying on the bed and the walls appear to be bulging inwards, then flexing back. In, out, in, out. The posts around

her parents' bed, in the corner, writhe and twist like serpents; the ceiling above her ripples, like the surface of a lake; her hands seem at once too close and then very far away. The line where the white of the plasterwork meets the dark wood of the joists shimmers and refracts. Her face and chest are hot, burning, covered with slick sweat, but her feet are ice-cold. She shivers, once, twice, a full convulsion, and sees the walls bend towards her, closing in, then pulling away. To block out the walls, the serpentine bedposts, the moving ceiling, she shuts her eyes.

As soon as she does so, she is elsewhere. In many places at once. She is walking through a meadow, holding tight to a hand. The hand belongs to her sister, Susanna. It has long fingers and a mole on the fourth knuckle. It does not want to be held: the fingers aren't curled around Judith's, but kept stiff and straight. Judith has to grip with all her might for it not to slide from her. Susanna takes great steps through the long grass of the meadow and with each one her hand jerks in Judith's. If Judith lets go, she may sink beneath the surface of the grass. She may be lost, never to be found. It is important – crucial – for her to keep hold of this hand. She must never let go. Ahead of them, she knows, is her brother. Hamnet's head bobs in and out of the grass. His hair is the colour of ripe wheat. He bounds through the meadow, ahead of them, like a hare, like a comet.

Then Judith is in a crowd. It is night-time, cold; the glow of lanterns punctuates the freezing dark. She thinks it is the Candlemas fair. She is in and also above a crowd, on a pair of strong shoulders. Her father. Her legs grip his neck and he holds her by each ankle; she has buried her hands in his

hair. Thick dark hair he has, like Susanna's. She uses the smallest of her fingers to tap the silver hoop in his left ear. He laughs at this – she feels the rumble of it, like thunder, pass from his body to hers – and shakes his head to make the earring rattle against her fingernail. Her mother is there, and Hamnet and Susanna, and her grandmother. Judith is the one her father has chosen to ride on his shoulders: just her.

There is a great flaring of light. Braziers are bright and fierce around a wooden platform, raised to the level of herself, there, on her father's shoulders. On the platform are two men, dressed in gold and red clothing, with many tassels and ribbons; they have tall hats on their heads and their faces are white as chalk with blackened eyebrows and reddened lips. One lets out a high, keening cry and hurls a golden ball at the other; he flips himself on to his hands and catches the ball in his feet. Her father lets go of her ankles to applaud and Judith clutches at his head. She is terrified she might fall, tip back, off his shoulders and into the seething, restive crowd that smells of potato peelings, of wet dog, of sweat and chestnuts. The man's cry has set fear in her heart. She doesn't like the braziers; she doesn't like the men's jagged eyebrows; she doesn't like any of this at all. She begins, quietly, to weep, the tears coursing from her cheeks to rest like pearls in her father's hair.

Susanna and her grandmother, Mary, are not yet home. Mary has stopped to talk to a woman of the parish: they barter compliments and demurrals, pat each other on the arm but Susanna isn't fooled. She knows the woman does not like her grandmother; the woman can't stop looking around, over her shoulder, wondering if anyone is observing her in conversation

with Mary, wife of the disgraced glover. There are many in the town, Susanna knows, who were once their friends and now cross the street to avoid them. It has been going on for years, but ever since her grandfather was fined for not attending church, many of the townsfolk have dropped the pretence of civility and will walk past without acknowledging them. Susanna sees how her grandmother plants herself in the woman's way, so that she cannot get past, cannot avoid talking to them. She sees all of this. The knowledge of it burns the inside of her head, leaving black scorch marks.

Judith lies alone on her bed, opening and closing her eyes. She cannot comprehend what has happened to this day. One moment, she and Hamnet were pulling bits of thread for the cat's new kittens – keeping an eye open for their grandmother, because Judith had been told to chop the kindling and polish the table while Hamnet did his schoolwork – and then she had suddenly felt a weakness in her arms, an ache in her back, a prickling in her throat. I don't feel well, she'd said to her brother, and he had looked up from the kittens, at her, and his eyes had travelled all over her face. Now she is on this bed and she has no idea how she got here or where Hamnet has gone or when her mother is coming back or why no one is there.

The maid is taking a long time to make her selection from the late milking at the market, flirting with the dairyman behind his stall. Well, well, he is saying, not letting go of the pail. Oh, the maid is replying, tugging at the handle. Will you not let me have it? Have what? the dairyman says, raising his eyebrows.

*

Agnes has finished collecting her honey and has taken up a sack and the burning rosemary and is making for the swarm of bees. She will sweep them into the sack and return them to the hive, but gently, ever so gently.

The father is two days' ride away, in London, and is, at this very moment, striding through Bishopsgate towards the river, where he aims to buy one of the flat, unleavened griddle cakes that sell on stalls there. He has a terrible hunger in him today; he woke with it, and his breakfast of ale and porridge and his lunch of pie has not sated it. He is careful with his money, keeping it close to his person, never spending more than he has to. It is the subject of much ribbing from those he works with. People say of him that he has gold stored in bags under the boards of his lodging: he has heard this and smiled. It is, of course, not true: everything he earns he sends home to Stratford, or takes with him, wrapped and stowed in his saddlebags, if he is making the journey. But, still, he doesn't spend a groat unless absolutely necessary. And this day the griddle cake, in mid-afternoon, is such a necessity.

Alongside him walks a man, the son-in-law of his landlord. This man has been talking since they left the house. Hamnet's father is listening only intermittently to what the man is saying – something about a grudge towards his father-in-law, a dowry unfulfilled, a promise not kept. He is thinking instead of the way the sun reaches down, like ladders, through the narrow gaps in buildings to illuminate the rain-glazed street, of the griddle cake that awaits him near the river, of the flap and soap-tang of laundry hanging above his head, of his wife, fleetingly, the way her twinned shoulder-blades flex together

and apart as she pins up the weight of her hair, of the stitching in the toe of his boot that seems to have worked itself loose and how he must now pay a visit to the cobbler, perhaps after he has eaten his griddle cake, as soon as he has rid himself of the landlord's son-in-law and his querulous babbling.

And Hamnet? He is re-entering the narrow house, built in a gap, a vacancy. He is sure, now, that other people will be back. He and Judith will no longer be alone. There will be someone here now who will know what to do, someone to assume charge of this, someone who will tell him that all is well. He steps in, letting the door swing closed behind him. He calls, to say he is back, he is home. He pauses, waiting for an answer, but there is nothing: only silence.