

## Stormy's Grave

It's the fourth day of winter. The golden-Indian summer of harvest time has vanished into sleeting mists of winter, to days of 5 degrees, to nights of minus 2.

The grapes picked in the last glorious days of May sunshine are already crushed and fermented, and have begun their mysterious journey of becoming in their barrel-cocoons. The golden leaves drop from the vines, and the bare canes sit in sharp relief against the grey skies. A few unpicked bunches hang frozen on the end-assemblies, and the rows which were heavy with summer's fruit and leaf are frosty and bare. The harvest is over and all things are returning to the earth.

It must have been the cold that took him. He was old, and perhaps this year his sleek black coat was not enough.

We notice the smell first. In the beginning, it is hard to recognise, but today it is sharper: the sweet, rank smell of death. When we find him, he is under the apple tree, in the frozen shade of the hundred-year old pines.

This place was his favourite corner of the paddock. The gnarled old apple is near the house, and when he stood there, he could watch us in our comings and goings, and in our franticness with our human concerns. He could munch the fallen apples and scratch his bottom against the fence.

He was David's horse. Stormy. Like his black coat. Like his temperament. One moment loving and velvet-gentle, and in the next he could lay back his ears, curl his soft lips and bite. Dissy was mine. Dissy, my beautiful, my part-arab, part-thoroughbred, intelligent, willing and strong. Dissy was mine, but already it has been five years since

he has been gone. I didn't see his body, just felt the empty hole of my childhood as it slipped from my fingers.

And now it's Stormy's time. How quickly the years have circled. Stormy, so greedy with a piece of bread, Stormy with his sweeping long black tail. There is no sign of struggle. He was very old.

We find a place for him in the sunniest corner of the paddock. There's a hollow there, to help us with our digging, and it catches the sunshine from the morning until late in the afternoon.

It's a big hole we have to dig. Such a big hole. How often have I heard someone say that they have buried someone? Yet how many of us ever get to do the burying? Jason and I work quietly together. There's not much need to speak. We dig the rich chocolate folds of the earth, feel it's livingness underneath us, feel the sun on our backs and the life-blood running in our veins. He brings the old Massey Ferguson – the 35X with the scoop that Dad used once to dig all the dams on the vineyard. I work with the shovel, working gently with the living-earth.

It's heavy to dig. Jason tells me there's a tonne of earth in every cubic metre. Jason, wise beyond his years, says that there is value immeasurable in sweat.

When it is time, we lay Stormy in his last bed. I talk to him all the way. I'm talking to him like I'm talking to Emma and Sophie when I put them to bed at night. It's simpler and more gentle than I could have possibly imagined.

We cover him with earth, and the cows in the next door paddock stand and watch. It's just Stormy who we are burying – not the alien Death, unimaginable, unheard, unseen. It's just Stormy – who flirted and pigrooted and bit, who never wanted to go my way. Stormy who was black and fat with feet sore from founder and white socks. It's Stormy, a loved and conscious being, who we are laying in the earth.

And as we lay him there, it is not just him. He is Dissy, my glorious part-arab bay, He is Harmony, on whose gentle grey back I learned to ride. He is my childhood.

When we have dug all day, and when the sun has dropped finally behind the pine trees, we put the last shovels of earth on the grave. I can hardly lift my arms from exhaustion, and the air is suddenly chill without the sun. When it is done, I lean on my shovel, and I know that something in me has changed. I know too, that this is not a grave – not in the way that I had thought before. The earth itself here lives and breathes, and this place is different because Stormy lived.

I leave the gate to the paddock open. There is no need to shut it any more.

- Nicola Hoskins, July 2002