

## On the Wall

By Jo Walton

\* \* \* \*

Trees. Tall trees and short trees, trees in autumn colours and trees winter-stark, branches bared against the sky. Trees with needles, trees with leaves golden, brown, and every possible shade of green. Trees in sunlight. Trees weighed down with snow. Trees that covered this land from the mountains to the sea with only a few clearings cut in them where men huddle. At first I could see nothing but trees. Nothing else stayed still for long enough.

I suppose there were years before I learned to understand, years in which I passively reflected what was set before me, but the first thing I remember is the trees. It was the trees that first made me think, long ago, when I was without words. What I thought was this, though more formless: trees change, but are the same. And I thought: there are trees before me, but I have seen other trees. And on that thought the other trees rippled on my surface, and the old man cried out in joy. I was not aware of that, of course. He told me later. At that point he was barely a shadow to me. He had never stood still for long enough for me to see him, as I could see a tree. I do not know how long it was before I learned to reflect people. People move so fast, and must always be doing.

The old man and his wife were great sorcerers both, and they had fled from some castle in some clearing, the better to have freedom to practice their arts. This was all they ever told me, though sometimes they set me to see that castle, a grey stone keep rising from trees, with a few tilled fields around it before the trees began again. The man had made me, he said, and they had both set spells upon me, and so I was as I was. They taught me from the time I was made, they said. They talked to me constantly, and at last with much repetition I learned not merely to reflect them but to see them and to understand their words and commands. They told me to show them other parts of the woods, or places in clearings, and I would do so, although at first anything I had not seen before would just pass over my face like a ripple in a pond. What I liked best was hour upon hour of contemplation, truly taking in and understanding something. When they left me alone I would always turn my thoughts to trees.

Their purpose in making me was to have a great scrying glass capable of seeing the future. In this sense I am a failure—I can see only what *is*, not what has been or will be. They still had hope I would learn, and tried to make me show them Spring in Autumn and Winter in Summer. I could not, I never could, nor could I see beyond the bounds of this kingdom. I have seen the sea lapping on the shore, the little strip of beach before the edge of the forest, and I have seen the snowy peaks of the mountains high up out of reach, but I have never seen further. These are my limits. Nevertheless I was a great and powerful work—they told me so—and there was much they found they could do with me. I did not mind. In time I came to enjoy seeing new things, and watching people.

Some time later—I cannot say how long, for I had then no understanding of time—the old woman bore a child. She was born at the time of year when the bluebells were all nodding in the green woods, and this was the scene I showed in the cottage the day she was born. It was my choice of scene; that day they were too busy to command me.

Shortly afterwards they began to teach me to reflect places I had never seen. This took much time, and I fear the child was neglected. I struggled to obey their commands and to show what they commanded to the best of my understanding. The child would come and peer into my depths sometimes, but usually one of the parents would push her away. Her name was Bluebell.

I always heard her name spoken with an irritation they never used on me. When she was a little older they would sometimes command me to display some sight she would enjoy—animals playing, farmers cutting corn, dwarves cutting diamonds out of rock, the waves washing the shore—and she would sit for hours, entranced, while they worked.

A little later again, she would command me herself, in much broader terms than her parents. “Mirror, Mirror, show me the nicest flower!” I had been built to tell the truth, and indeed could do nothing else, so I would find her some perfect wild rose half-hidden under a hawthorn tree. “It was a daffodil before,” she’d complain, and so it had been. She could not really understand my explanations, but I tried to say that the daffodil was long dead and now the rose was best. She cried. Her mother slapped her. Bluebell was a headstrong girl, and there was no wonder, with all this, that she grew up jealous of me and hungry for love and attention. I felt sorry for her. I suppose in a way I loved her. She was her parents’ victim as much as I was. Even when she screamed in rage and threatened to break me I felt nothing but pity.

The old woman taught the girl to cook and brew up the potions she used in magic, but she did not teach her any spells. The old man almost ignored her; he was getting older and spent almost all the time he was awake trying to get me to show him the future.

Then, one day, the herald came. In all the time from when I was made until then, when Bluebell was sixteen, nobody had entered the house but the old couple, the girl, and the occasional pedlars who came to all the forest houses. I thought at first, seeing this man ride up, that he was a pedlar. Pedlars dressed in bright colours and wore their packs on their backs, ready to take off and unfold to display their goods. I always liked seeing the shining pans and bright ribbons and combs they showed, even though the old woman never bought any. But this man was no pedlar. He was dressed all in red and gold, and he had only a small pack, such as anyone might carry their own provisions in. He held a long scroll in his hand, and when the old woman opened the door he unrolled the scroll and read from it.

“Hear ye all my people of the forest!” began the herald. “This is a

Proclamation from King Carodan in Brynmaeg Castle. My queen has died, and, there being no other foreign Princess that pleases me, I desire to take a bride from among my own people to be a comfort to me and a mother to my baby daughter, Snowdrop. Therefore I send out heralds to all corners of My Kingdom to inquire of all girls desirous of being viewed to come to Brynmaeg for the Grand Selection Ball which will take place on the day of the Autumn Moon. Girls must be between the ages of sixteen and twenty, subjects of my kingdom and previously unmarried.” The herald said all this on one breath, as if he had said it many times before (doubtless he had), then rolled the scroll up again.

“Be off, varlet!” said the old woman in a commanding tone. “That has nothing to do with us!”

“Only doing my job,” mumbled the herald, in quite another tone of voice. “My instructions are to go to all the forest houses, all of them, mind you, missing none, and read that proclamation. You’ve heard it now, and it didn’t cost you anything. I’m going, I’m going!”

Just then Bluebell jumped up from where she had been weeding beside the cottage. “I want to go to the Ball!” she said. “Oh Mother, please! I’m sixteen, and I’m beautiful, I know I am!” She was, in fact, very beautiful, with a pleasing ripe figure, long golden hair, and large blue eyes with long dark lashes. As she stood there in her brown smock with her hair loose about her face she looked the very picture of what the king said he wanted—a bride from his own people. The herald obviously thought so too, for he said:

“This is my last call before I return to Brynmaeg, miss. If you wish I will escort you there.”

“And who’s to escort her back when the king turns her down?” scoffed the old woman. “And why should I trust you not to tumble her over a toadstool on the way? Anyway, she’s not going. Be on your way!”

The herald bowed to Bluebell, ignored her mother, and walked off. I looked at Bluebell, which meant that even though she was in the side garden and I was hung facing the front window, she was reflected in my surface. She looked angry and cross rather than sad, and I was sure she was planning something. The old woman turned to me and gave me a little tap. I didn’t feel it, of course. I can feel nothing, only see and hear. I don’t regret that. I always used to think that if Bluebell carried out her threat and broke me, then at least there would be no pain.

Late that night I was musing on moonlight on the sea when I saw Bluebell creep across the room to where the herbs were stored. She mixed up a potion, then stored a quantity of herbs in a bag. She then tiptoed away to the room where her parents slept. Automatically I “followed” her and watched while she rubbed her potion into her parents’ faces. I thought it was a sleeping potion. Even when I saw the look on her face I thought that. Even when she took her gloves off and dropped

them beside the bed. It was not until they began to scream and writhe that I guessed what she had done.

She did not stay and watch them die, though she let them get a good look at her leaving. They could not move, of course, that was the nature of the poison; they lay in agony unable even to curse. I was sure that my time had come too, that she would smash me before leaving, but I was surprised to find that she took me off the wall, wrapped me carefully, and carried me with her from the house.

We caught up with the herald the next morning, and he escorted us safely to Brynmaeg. He made no assaults upon Bluebell's honour, but he did contrive to let her know that he was a single man, and likely to be made a knight the next year, and was interested, should she not reach her highest ambition.

He left us at the city gates. Bluebell was allotted rooms to live in while awaiting the Autumn Moon, which would be only two days after our arrival. The house where we were lodged was in the town, below the Castle. It belonged to a washerwoman who provided food, regularly and not ungraciously, but seemed little interested.

Bluebell hung me on the wall of her chamber and sat down soberly in front of me. "Mirror, Mirror, show me my parents."

They lay still on the bed, their faces twisted into grimaces of pain. Bluebell laughed. "Show me the other candidates!" she commanded. I found them and then showed them one by one. Most of them she dismissed with a snap of her fingers, but two or three made her hesitate, especially the fine ladies dressed in satins and silks. Then she took a deep breath. "Mirror, Mirror, on the wall—who is the fairest of them all?"

I had been taught to show truth, and did not know how to do anything else. Yet such a question is bound to be subjective. I had seen all the girls, as they were at that moment. But the fairest of them all? One of them was asleep, and another frowning, who might both be beauties when the king saw them. I hesitated, surface clouded, then showed my true thought. Bluebell. To me she was the fairest, the most beautiful.

I was frightened then, for she laughed with glee and flung herself down on the bed. I kept reflecting her, as if I were an ordinary mirror. I thought of trees, but they failed to calm me. There was a storm coming, and the treetops moved in the breeze. In innumerable forest houses people were lashing down shutters as evening came on. The old man and the old woman had not been good people, nor necessarily wise, but they had known a lot about magic. Bluebell did not. I was afraid, selfishly, for myself, for what might happen to me if she asked me these impossible questions, forced me to make judgements. Until that day I had, mostly, been happy. I had had no free will, for the spells of the old couple had kept me bound. Now in one way I was more free, and in another more trapped. The girl on the bed was asleep, looking the picture of health and beauty, and smiling gently in her sleep. The trees to the west

were lashed by wind and driving rain. I am a failure. I can only see what is, never what is to come.

*Copyright © 2001 Jo Walton*

\*

Jo Walton lives in Wales and on selected parts of Usenet. She has published stories in *Odyssey* and *Ad Hoc*, and poetry in *Artemis*. Her first novel, *The King's Peace*, came out from Tor in October 2000. The sequel *The King's Name* will be out in November 2001. Her previous publications in *Strange Horizons* can be found in our archives. For more about her work, see her Web site.