

The Greenhouse

THE COACHMAN, George Baker, was eyeing up Olive Flood through the curving glass window of his coach. He couldn't make up his mind whether he fancied her or not. The schoolmistress had exposed damp patches whenever she raised her arms to point out the plants to the kids. He was trying to picture a situation where it might be possible for him to discover whether she had damp patches elsewhere.

'Sara! Sara!,' Miss Flood called sharply, as if summoning a dog which'd wandered off. A warm trickle ran down her back and from her armpits. She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. She could smell her own under-arm sweat now. Such a heatwave! It must be ninety in the shade! She just had to find the child and get back to the coolness of the coach before she dropped. And the driver was waiting and the other kids getting restless.

Sara did not want to move from the greenhouse. Occasionally she'd heard the distant shouts and yells of the other children in the next door garden, but it wasn't much for they had to be good and study the plants and flowers.

She enjoyed looking out at the world from inside a house of glass. She could see the long, strong, spiky grass, a crumbling stone wall covered with moss and lichens over which she'd just climbed, and some tall green trees whose highest branches swayed ever-so-slightly. If she looked only at the high, swaying branches of the elms and limes crowded with green summer leaves, Sara could imagine she was high up too, hidden in a tree-house made entirely of glass. She did not mind the heat inside the greenhouse. She liked the steamy, peaceful silence, the colours and the fragrance of the exotic flowers and green, leafy, entwining vines around her. It was like finding herself in a strange, secret, tropical jungle.

Her body was streaming with fresh sweat. She'd have liked to take off her blouse and let it dry in the sun which beat its way through the glass, noiselessly, and once in there with her became gentler yet intenser like an invisible lover. She did not know whether she was too old to take off her blouse. She hadn't gone around without her top on at the seaside last summer. She glanced down at the tender buds of her developing breasts and touched them through her blouse. They showed through the damp, clinging material, small, fine delicate tightly-closed things that seemed not to belong to her and yet the woman in her had known for some time that these same, small fine delicate tightly-closed things would one day expand and bloom and be sought after by her lover more passionately than the buds and blooms of the rarest and most beautiful flower.

The sun was crawling over her neck, gently, oh, so gently, with a shy and secret passion, seeking her complicity. Her being alive and not moving away and not doing anything at all was her shy form of complicity. She had not moved away or done anything at all when the man at the dinner table had secretly stroked her thigh under the table. She had just refilled his glass with his

favourite full red wine. Smiling exquisitely, he had watched her do it, then lightly touched and squeezed her knee. She had looked solemnly and wonderingly into his face. The next time she filled his glass he let his hand linger a little longer, and she gave him the same look, now unmistakably overflowing with a yearning tenderness. The unique docility of his strong brown hand had enchanted her. He had nice, big, dreamy eyes that seemed all-seeing, all-understanding, and when he smiled, lots of tiny lines exploded all around them like the grain in the lovely wood carving of an eagle she had once seen in a church. His cheeks were smooth and pink-softly glowing from the wine; his mouth resolute but tender. He glanced at her briefly, rememberingly, and, quite suddenly a little sadly. Then with a lazy, graceful, twist and stretch of his long, strong, supple neck, he turned his head to talk to her father. He said something nice to him about herself and her mother. Suddenly he'd looked so happy! He drew up his hand from under the table and touched her face quite openly with his strong, delicate fingers, and she, by now quite beside herself with confusion and joy, had blushed, lowering her eyes on her chaste mouth, enshrouded in her mute love for the man. She had longed to kiss that wonderful hand. Her father had smiled and her beautiful mother had laughed gaily. Then Sara had cast veiled, anxious glances at the level of deep, iridescent red in his fine thin glass, in her anticipation becoming quite deliciously drunk herself as it steadily fell, sip by sip, drop, by drop, by drop. Sara, trembling, had been glad she did not have to pour him another glass before his hand again returned, secretly, first to her own hand, and then to her thigh, until, at last, gently, gently, oh, so lovingly and gently, he'd caressed her, first through the thin silk of her dress, and then on her bare skin, after pulling up her dress, very, very, slowly, while she, tantalised and bewitched, held her breath, wide-eyed with joy, her parents for their part completely captivated by the musical spell of the man's voice, for all the while he managed to keep up an unceasing flow of inspired, enchanting anecdotes.

Yes, he had dared special, secret things with her, that no-one need ever know, just like the sun was daring now, doing it to her now, again, like her invisible lover. But he had not been invisible. He had been there, this lovely friend of her mother and father, actually there at the dinner table with them. It had only been what he was doing that made him, the real him, the him only she knew, the special important him that was hers and had been visible to only her. What she could not know then was the poignant secret of the man's destiny, that he'd be dead from a sudden, massive heart attack three days later. Amazingly, quite dead. She often wondered whether he knew he was going to die so soon. Perhaps she herself had read his fate in the fleeting, flickering sadness in his eyes. It was a pity though he had died. She had wanted to do things with him, to share things and tell him things that only he in his vivacity and wisdom would ever have understood. She missed him.

'My God, this sun is too much,' sighed Olive Flood. She had looked all over the garden - behind the trees and hollyhocks and wisteria and Japanese magnolia

and even in the waterlily pond, well you can never be too careful. She wondered whether he fiancé Julian would be in a good mood tonight or be withdrawn and silent. He'd been under such a lot of pressure lately at the office. He worked so awfully hard. Oh, it would be so nice to go out together to the boat club and chat to some friends over a nice cool light and lime. She could almost hear the chinkle of ice cubes now, in her mind. Maybe they could even go for a midnight swim. Anything to forget this awful day in the sun.

George Baker looked at his watch and then at the pretty knees of Miss Flood. She had dimples behind them. She was bending, looking into some rhododendron bushes. The schoolmistress had quite a flamboyant taste in clothes. She was wearing an Inca Indian cotton dress of pure yellow and wore no stockings. Her shapely calves were white as the whitest honey against the yellow of her dress and the purple of the rhododendrons and the greenness of the grass. She straightened up and raised her arms, pointing with both hands to a line of cypress trees. Two of the children ran off obediently in opposite directions to look behind the line of trees to see if Sara was hiding there. Into the coachman's eyes crept a fire, a fire like flames trying to burst forth from the centres of blocks of blue ice. If only she'd keep her arms raised and twirl about like one of them flamin' dancers. He took off his cap and carefully wiped out the pond of perspiration that had collected in the bald crown of his head. He suddenly realised that new circumstances had arisen. His hand trembled as he put his handkerchief away. It would not of course be possible for him to step into his fantasy regarding other damp patches the schoolmistress may have elsewhere on her person. But he could possibly go and get near enough to smell the damp patches he already knew existed. He thought of his wife and her damp patches and grimaced. This was not the same thing.

He could see clearly, straight away now what it was he didn't like about the schoolmistress. It was her mouth. It was much too small. It was almost lipless, as if the lips had shrivelled away through lack of kissing. Her smelt her moist sweat now, the very essence of her, and did not want to kiss her mouth. He didn't know quite what it was he wanted. He wanted something very badly. He'd never wanted a woman like this. There was something dirty about it. The sun was driving him wild. It was filthy, what he wanted to do. But he couldn't help wanting to do it. When she turned to face him he wanted to drop to his knees lift her dress and bury his face in her bush.

'Anything wrong Miss? Lost one of your party 'ave you?'

'Yes it seems so. I'm sorry driver, can you wait a bit?'

'Course I can. Tell you what, Miss, I'll help you look for her.'

'O thank you so much. Listen children, all of you go and get in the coach and wait for me there. Go on, run along all of you. I won't be long.'

They were walking towards a crumbled wall, covered with lichens, that divided the garden from the grounds next door. They were screened from any possible view from the coach by the shrubs and trees. The only building in sight was a derelict greenhouse on the other side of the wall, surrounded by long grass. The man did not seem in a hurry to find the missing child. The woman

did not realise at first that his eyes of icy blue fire became restless and unfocused when she raised her arm and pointed to a line of trees over the wall some thirty yards distant. She looked at this rumped bear of a man now and saw him really for the first time. She didn't like his eyes. The look in them fused most disturbingly, a hard bright intensity and an emptiness of mind. They made her feel curiously angry and impatient and yet inadequate - helpless even. For a moment she too forgot the child and thought only of her Julian. She wanted her Julian to be with her now as she was afraid. She thought to herself that she ought to call the police. She wondered whether she ought to ask the man to find a phone box and call the police. But she hated any unnecessary fuss. After all, it was only a game of hide and seek, and she didn't want to look hysterical or foolish back at the school. She would find the child. She'd make a real effort now and find her! 'Sara! Sara!', she called, in short sharp yelps, 'Sara! Look Driver, you wait and look around here. I'll go over the wall to that copse and see if she's there. She may be hiding. I hope to God she hasn't fallen out of a tree and broken her neck!'

She went over the wall where it had crumbled and dropped to a lower level and the man stood there watching her walk towards the elms on the other side of the field, away from the greenhouse. She was calling Sara all the time, but had paid no attention to the greenhouse. He hated her posh little voice with its frigid sharpness, and yet the more things he found to resent and hate about the bitch, the more he wanted her. And he did not know what it was he wanted. He wanted to possess not her, for he did not like her, didn't like her enough to want her entirely. He wanted to perform some extreme act with only a part of her, the part he found attractive, and to somehow leave out any parts he found offensive. He wanted to separate her from her voice, her lips, and just have her calves, her thighs, the smell of her sweat around him. He wanted to cut away any part of her he didn't want, so that the parts he did want would not be spoiled. He wanted to make her ooze sweat and juice, shit and blood. He realised he was a potential murderer, but the murder of this snotty little schoolmistress would be justified. And afterwards his public trial would bring him another kind of relief, when everything would be focused on him entirely, on him and his feelings and his needs. No one would be in the least bit concerned with her needs and feelings - they would no longer exist. For the first time in his life people would make it their business to know and understand him totally - that would be worth the death of Miss, surely? Yes, he'd be so happy in being known and understood as though he had to be known and understood by others, have them really question and discuss him, before he could be known and understood by himself. Once he was known and understood by himself, he'd be at peace and ready to die. He thought now though not of dying and of death but of the overwhelming state of being alive he'd attain in the next few moments, and he wondered how long his subsequent state of frenzied, splendid, delirious happiness could be sustained once he'd embarked on the final dazzling act. He knew that once he'd set the machinery in motion, the murderous, marvellous machinery created in him only a few moments ago, there'd be no stopping it. He

stood there in the sun, the sun which was so glaringly white hot it seemed the very air was about to burst into flames all around him, and so strong was the sun it robbed the trees of their shadows. They melted in its glare. Its light was absolute, accentuating everything. The sun was everywhere, on the grass, on the trees, on the flowers, on the water in the pond, on the wall, the sun, everywhere; everywhere was the sun, everywhere for love, for hate, for lust. There was no shelter from the sun. It was everywhere. He stood there in the sun, by the ruined wall, sweating, and trembling; exultant, expectant, a monstrous energy growing in him, boiling up out of him, warping, in the sun.

The kids waiting in the coach were bored stiff. They had not enjoyed the afternoon's nature ramble to the country garden. Charlie Lawrence for one hadn't found much fun in the droopy-looking flowers. He wasn't used to trips out into the country. He didn't consider it a treat. He preferred playing in the bombed-out old houses of Hackney where he lived. He and his gang regularly fought other neighbourhood gangs in these houses. They'd arm up with an assortment of knives, air-guns, catapults, bows and arrows, quarter-staves and swords. Sometimes they'd kidnap a girl and take her back to their camp where they'd pull down her knickers, hoping to find hairs on her prat. They might even strip her completely, and examine her thoroughly, make her prance about, get a bit dancey, so they could have a good look. If they liked what they found they'd truss her up and torture her and afterwards let her join the gang. If they didn't want her they'd just tie her up for the afternoon and ignore her, her clothes thrown loosely on top of her. When it was time for them to go home for their tea, they'd untie her, force her to get dressed and send her home, grizzling, for she wouldn't want to leave them without being tortured, her lusty little body aching for something really brutal to happen.

Charlie grinned to himself at these tasty recollections. He could do with a bit of action. He was also dying for a fag. He hadn't got his Woodbines with him. Earlier he'd scoured the garden, and the gutters in the road for dog-ends but had failed to find his favourite weed. He had looked all over the floor of the coach and in the ashtrays behind the seats, but all he'd found were lolly sticks and sweet wrappers, Smith's crisps packets and twists of salt, a mound of spilled sherbet and chewed bits of liquorice wood; a gobstopper, well sucked-and-rainbowed, still sticky and covered in fluff and shmeg; a fivestone, and a jack. And not one decent bit of snout. Bleedin' peasants! Suddenly all this thinking in the stifling heat of the coach was too much for Charlie and he scratched his armpit and yawned. He glanced through the window, across the road to the sunlit garden. No-one coming yet. He sank back into his seat, which was as comfy as his Auntie Maud's settee. Ah well, he'd just have forty winks for now, then maybe get up, go outside and have another butcher's.

Sara could hear Miss Flood calling her. But she didn't answer. The voice of her schoolmistress came to her so remotely, from such a vast distance, it was like the voice of someone she did not know calling to someone else she didn't

know. It had nothing to do with her. She had found a sun-filled secret world, full of endless smiles, kisses and caresses. A *Calendula* Geisha Girl, grown tall as a sunflower, blushing face wide as a dinner plate, beamed down at Sara. The purple petals of an African Iris touched together like smiling cat's lips. All these flowers, long ago abandoned in this forgotten hothouse, had bloomed undisturbed, into gentle giants. In the lush solitude of this tropical Eden they stood, silently, growing, their heads nodding, attentive, listening, like people.

The fingers of the sun trembled as they lay there on the white silk blouse she'd spread out on the warm stone floor. It was quite dry now, but she didn't put it on. She arose from where she was sitting cross-legged in a sort of lotus posture on the floor by a watering can rusted delicate in patches like lace filigree. Her chest brushed against a cool fern: she shivered with pleasure and closed her eyes. The vinegary fragrance of her own body mingled with the spicy perfumes of the freesias and the honeysuckle that, wild, had found its way into the dense, torrid jungle of the greenhouse through some cracks in the door. She opened her eyes and saw the sun filtering through the tangerine begonias and the African violets and the pink peonies, mingling the colours of their petals in dappled arabesques on her skin. Her breasts seemed to take shape and swell. The mingling of condensing moistures from her body and the plants misted up the windows, making them opaque. But she didn't want to look out of the window and was glad that no-one would be able to see in. A fly lisped against the glass. Sara took gentle hold of a honeysuckle flower, grown large as a lily, by the throat and neck of its long corolla and brushed its anthers and stigma against the pink buds of her chest, dusting them with pollen. They expanded and stiffened and tingled with such an intensity and sublime pleasure she felt that at any moment they'd surely burst open. All around her were the flowers, flowers growing, flowers thrusting up through earth in red clay pots, buds of flowers opening, heads of flowers dripping, pulsing, surging with heavenly colours, rising up and expanding; wonderful perfumed flowers, chrysanthemums, geraniums, bougainvillea, and orchids and gloxinias; everywhere around her - flowers; flowers blooming, flowers swaying, flowers trembling, flowers dizzily spinning, flowers reaching - reaching up, reaching out - to her, to each other, to the sun! Their green stems, like limbs, unfurling, stretching, climbing, entwining; the leaves - like hands, like wings, opening, spreading, touching. Oh, and the petals! Soft, fleshy petals, heart-shaped petals, circular petals, long tapering petals, like swords, tapering away, tapering down, to the savage-tender source of light and darkness, to the womb! All the while the sun was beckoning to her, drawing her, making her tingle, making her blood beat and throb, making her glow, making her bloom. She sat on the blouse so that she might be touched by the warm, strong, brown fingers of her lover. She felt so happy, she wanted to dance, she wanted to sing! She was enraptured. She gazed in wonder at a lovely slender lily that had dipped its head towards her to reveal to her something long and pink lolling like a tongue in its bruised-red throat. In other flowers, similar things stuck up like stiffened tongues in their gaping mouths, as if they were all panting or laughing in delicious pleasure. The catlips of the

African Iris were parted now by a pink tongue, curling out like a playful kitten's, laughing, and all ready to lap up milk. Oh dear, that voice again! The voice of Miss Flood piercing the peaceful and intense silence, a silence swarming with flowers, swarming with colours, swarming with a million happy sensations. The voice of her schoolmistress cut through the swarming silence like a scythe. She seemed very near. She was still calling, thankfully again now getting further away.

The voice of Miss Flood was sing-song now, now short sharp and urgent and full of precise purpose. Now it was losing its precision, losing its cutting edge, and had a resigned, tired, blunted, failed, imploring quality about it, suddenly like the hopeless clatter of a discarded implement on a stone floor. Then there was silence. A crazed fly jabbed itself a dozen times at a window pane.

Sara did not like Miss Flood. She didn't like her voice. It made her think of her small mean lipless mouth and she shuddered. These thoughts were an intrusion here in her paradise of sun and flowers. Yet, she still felt perfectly at peace, detached and secure and safe. Nothing could harm her.

The reassuring hand of her lover, the sun, began moving, very, very slowly, fingertip soft, along the cheek of her face, over her throat, fingers like tongues licking into the tiny, cave-like hollows at the base of her throat, down over her chest, and she undressed completely now and lay back on her clothes to allow him to caress the whole of her chest, her breast buds, her rib-cage, her waist, her belly. The sun suddenly burned with a breath-taking intensity that was monumental in its silence like the unexpected yet inevitable, matter-of-fact reclaiming of the world, by matter, through the animation of huge stone statues. She wanted to shout out with joy, but instead, as she felt the warm fingers stealing downwards from her belly, down, down, oh, so lovingly and slowly and gently down, she did not shout out but laid her own hand over that of her lover, her white hand, white as a swan's white wing, touched the golden fingers of the sun, entwined resolutely with them and glided united with them down over the smooth and awesome final stages of their journey.

In the back of the coach some of the children were playing hangman. Steve Cherry was dozing, fitful. The boil on his bum hurt. His mum had put a hot kaolin poultice on it that morning to draw the boil to a head. She'd told him not to touch it but once the pain and inflammation died down he knew he wouldn't be able to resist. He loved deadheading his spots and boils and squeezing out the blood, the pus. He felt too knackered from the heat to talk to any of the other kids. They all looked too gormless anyway. He couldn't concentrate on his Adventure either because he kept thinking of his sweetheart, Nancy Bishop. Nancy hadn't been allowed to come on the outing in case she ran amuck with him in the garden, ripping up the precious plants. But they were going to have to be ripped up anyway sooner or later if the site was going to be turned into a new town, and what's more he'd seen that old hypocrite of a Miss Trickle not only snip-snipping away taking cuttings but casting furtive glances about her before

jerk-jerking up whole plants and bushes in totem.

Blimey, she carted off enough stuff back here to the coach to open a bleedin' nursery! Where the bleedin' 'ell's that soppo Sara Rampling got to anyway? The garden ain't *that big*, so why can't the old cow and that bald-headed old sod of a coach driver find her! Maybe the pair of them are having it off together in the bushes.

He couldn't even be bothered to open his drooping eyes to look out the window. He just wanted to get back home to Cissbury Road, have his tea of bread and jam, and get out raking the streets with his mates. Maybe if he was lucky, yes, it was still only Tuesday, there'd be some dripping left from the Sunday joint if Dad hadn't scoffed it all when he came home for his dinner, and maybe Mum'd made a bread-pudding too. But he remembered there'd be no jelly or gravy left, for he himself had broke right through the white virgin outer crust of the bowl of dripping the day before, digging deep down with the knife, deep deep down until he'd scooped out most of the brown and lovely stuff he loved so much spread on great doorsteps of white bread, on the crusts of Wonderloaf, spread thick, thick as his dad spread the horses' shit, which he himself was sent rushing out into the street to scoop up for the allotment after the rag-n-bone man'd passed by.

He thought again of Nancy Bishop, and her knickers. Once, last winter, she'd performed cartwheels for him on the streets of Hackney. She was a wonderful acrobat, She'd spun over and over, round and round like a great big Catherine-wheel in a dazzling blur of navy blue and pink-blotched lily-white. He'd watched, his heart cartwheeling along with her. He caught sight of a hole in her knickers and snatched her in mid air and held her tight in his arms by the legs while she, suspended upside down, broke free, wrapped her legs around his waist and bent right back, placing her palms on the edge of the pavement behind her like a crab. He'd wanted to have a closer look at that hole in her knickers. He imagined the valley between the smooth round hills of Nancy's arse as quite breathtaking, much more breathtaking than the valleys of Wales he's seen two years ago when he was evacuated.

He didn't mind her knickers looked a bit gungy. And they had soot on them. She'd gone into their secret place, their special favourite bombed-out house a few minutes before and taken them down and squatted over the pile of black velvet in the fireplace to piss. He'd waited outside and tried to peep in at her through a chink in the boards. He hadn't seen anything but heard a nice noise like the gentle hushing of rain falling into the earth of his dad's allotment. While he held Nancy and she performed the crab for him he couldn't see anything so he started to pull down her knickers. She'd collapsed immediately and lay there in the gutter trying to drag her legs away from him, furiously pulling down the hem of her skirt: 'Not now, not here, you daft sod!', she'd scolded, her eyes blazing. 'If you want to be filthy wait till we get back to the house. Let me up at once or I'll pull yer goolies right off you here in front of the whole bleedin' street!' Later she'd taken him back to their house again. Down had come her knickers amongst the rubble and the rafters and she'd shown him then that jelly

and blancmange weren't the only things that wobbled.

He'd go and meet her tonight, soon as he got back, had his tea. He'd got a few flowers hid in his shirt for her, including a bunch of dandelions to make her wet the bed, the dirty little bugger.

The coachman climbed over the wall and stood there, gazing towards the line of elms on the other side of the field. He could not see the schoolmistress. But she must be somewhere, in there. Confronting him were some garden flowers, all gone wild. Heads of zinnias, swollen and red as if smeared and caked with dried blood, thrust up into the blinding light. Around them crowded blooms so demented looking that their names did not spring to mind. Some resembled livers, oozing snot-green bile and spotted with clots of blood. Others flaunted leaves the colour and texture of raw meat, with jagged ribs and purplish sinews, puffy leaves that seemed to be frothing beer and sweating rabid blood that stank. The petals of an orchid opened to reveal mouths like gaping flesh-wounds and then bent right back like human tongues with the strings stretched tight, and underneath were little wings of lollipop red like a child's windmill. Suddenly something else caught the corner of his left eye. He turned. For an instant, the sun dazzled his eyes from a dozen windows.

The sterile voice of Miss Flood, again louder this time, seeming closer, insistent, interrupted the lovers on their journey. Sara's breath was coming in a series of little gasps and sighs. All around her too, sighs seemed to rise up from the throats of flowers, all leaning towards her and opening up to her like mouths. She was trying not to let in any trivial intrusive thoughts, but even though she was panting now quite loudly, filling the greenhouse with these primeval noises that she'd never made in her life before, but which she somehow knew existed as the very cry of eternal life; even though she wanted her own fingers to stay entwined only with the fingers of her lover, she could not help thinking of the fingers and hands of her schoolmistress, Miss Flood. Her thoughts became enmeshed with images of Miss Flood, fatally flawing her joy as she approached her climax. She thought of the hands of her schoolmistress clad tightly in rubber gloves. She'd noticed Miss Flood polishing a car one day during the dinner break. The car park was divided from the school playground by an iron fence of pointed rods like the spears of African warriors. Through the gaps between the spears, Sara had seen Miss Flood polishing the pale, bilious-yellow sports car that belonged to her fiance, Julian. Sara had been going home to her dinner. The car shone obscenely in the noonday sun. Sara had watched for a few minutes, possessed by a curiosity that held her sharp as a spike. There was something revolting about it all, as if the car were some huge slug-like creature that belonged entirely to the private life of Miss Flood, and had no business to be there being performed on naked like this in front of the whole school under the beatific gaze of the sun. It was something that should have been done discreetly, if it had to be done at all, discreetly, secretly, in a garage under the ground.

An hour and a quarter later, Sara had returned from her dinner to find Miss

Flood still engaged with the car. It seemed enlarged, grossly swollen. She'd been caressing it for nearly two hours, with a soft leather, held in her soft rubber gloves.

When Olive Flood came to the line of elms she met with a surprise. She found herself at the edge of a wood beyond the elms filled with the most wonderful wild bluebells. She saw at once that Sara was unlikely to be here, for she was not hiding in the elms and the lime trees in the woods had boles over seven feet high, making it impossible for Sara to reach the lower limbs to climb up into them. She thought she'd better go into the wood though to look behind the trees incase Sara was hiding or had fallen asleep there.

Curiously, it no longer occurred to the schoolmistress to call out the girl's name. It was as if there were some strange spell here that held her and made her want to linger in the wood, and her search for the girl although her reason for being there quite suddenly became almost perfunctory, existing as a sort of faint pulse or drum beat receding in the distance, unobtrusive behind the melody of bluebells that saturated this cool shady wood.

She was standing at the edge of the wood gazing at the bluebells. It was so nice to be in the shade. She just wanted to stand here and look at the bluebells for a moment in the peace and stillness and calmness of this little wood. The abundance and blueness of them was breathtaking. The thick waves of rich purple stretched away under the lime trees broken here and there by islands of green, fresh brilliant green where the sun shone through the trees, and again beyond - blue, and still beyond, green and blue, brilliant blue masses of flowers, gorgeous and heavy, bending over their sea of prostrate leaves, in curves, long and lovely, lovely and blue.

She walked among these gleaming masses of flowers, picking her way carefully, like a dancer. Sometimes their velvety softness brushed against her bare legs, like cool fingers laid against her. Every here and there she came across a white one, or a pink one, a dark sombre purple pink, like a sudden glimpse of a very intimate part of her lover's body that she had no name for. My lover's body. My lover, Julian. Julian my lover, Julian my love. Julian's body. These words beat in her blood. The musky perfume of the flowers was making her light-headed! She stood in the middle of the wood of wild bluebells and the intensity of it all made her feel quite drunk. Once again her eye caught a glimpse of mushroomy pink shrinking into violet and suddenly she was giggling. Her hand to her mouth, she looked away and let her gaze flicker like the flight of a butterfly over the lime leaves suspended above her. The trees were so tall and the leaves so green. Her eye traced the delicate network of veins on a leaf of a nearby tree. She still couldn't get over her own naughtiness. She looked again at the bluebells. Clusters of tiny bells, some still unopened, all pursed and tight at the top of erect racemes. She gasped. She'd just caught herself wondering what it would be like to dart her tongue into one of those pink ones, yes, right into its tight, bruise-pink puckered little mouth.

George stood trembling by the wall in the sun. A trumpet creeper with flowers like ears, all veined and pink, rose up before him like a stethoscope, as if listening to the turmoil going on inside him. It was like a silent, accusing witness, recording and transmitting. He stretched out his hands and tore it all down. A huge hibiscus, livid crimson and raw pink, black throat deep as a vulva, gaped into his stricken face. He ripped it open in a frenzy, the slimy petals falling, like bloody, torn off lips.

There was nothing he could do to prevent it now. But it was only by acting he could continue to exist. If he didn't act soon and make some sort of real contact, he would melt in the sun. He'd just melt, just as if he were a flower himself, all made of wax. He raised his right hand to his dripping forehead to cross himself, but he couldn't complete it and his hand fell back uselessly to his side. He tried to think of his old mother. He tried to think of his wife. But it was no use. He had to do it. He couldn't help it. And really, it wasn't him. It was that other person, him, *it*.

His skin was stretched tight over the muscles of his face, all working away beneath like the parts of some intricate, delicate machine he could not switch off. With his feelings opening and blossoming like switchblades in his gut he stalked forward, following the path the schoolmistress had taken across the field to the trees, in the direction of the greenhouse....

(Extracted from the title story, "The Greenhouse", Brian Fogarty's brutal and beautiful collection of stories and poems).

Four poems selected from "The Greenhouse" collection of stories and poems:

THE NIGHTDRESS

I wipe a hole in the mirror and in her nightdress
wonder what it was like being loved and unloved
by the boy. From behind the skin-thin hide
of the partition I had climaxed with her in the night.
In the early morning I watched from the window
while she kissed and clung to him. Tenderly,
he unfastened her fingers like buttons one by one.

The mirror gapes like a vulva as the steam-clouds
divide. Skin-close my eyes swell against the stained
glass in worship as if it were someone else - the boy
the girl; both. I inhale the vinegary perfume
of their bodies in a solitary *ménage à trois*.

THE CHILLER
for Alice

I walk among the sarcophagi, excised hearts
and other organs; the bandaged girls: Alice entombed
alive in a glass cabinet, face dusted white,
hair the colour of goldfish, eyes pale as the first wind
of spring, white slip, girlish legs face and hands
geisha white.

In another cabinet a still life: *'uterus, liver & arsehole'*.
I'm moved by the angelic quality of human meat:
while I gaze deep impulses gnaw at me.
I pause by the lopped torso, run my palm over
the arm stump, cup the breast, tease the nipple,
open the cabinet, hold the heart, caress the gobed
kidney in its pouch of waxy fat, push my finger in her
arsehole, like they were sacred relics in the shrine
of a lover.

Other girls are entombed here in this crypt,
in this secret room they fill with the white radiance
of an igloo. I find a strange peace in this suspended
world hidden from the hurtling universe for eternity.
One girl stands against a wall, white face unwrapped,
body wrapped in white bandages, her arm held up;
a third stands completely wrapped, by a television;
a fourth lies under a table. None of them are moving,
except Alice.

When she is dead the embalmers will take her out
of the cabinet, chain her hooked through the armpits
to a rail in the ceiling, and when they paunch her
the bucket will be filled with ropes of moonstone,
opal, amethyst: even her insides are beautiful.
They will take her down, lift her arms and, their lips
tight with pins, wind her in white silk.

Now like a strange and lovely moth trapped live
under glass her fingers flutter, almost caress the glass,
unaware she's trapped, exploring the boundaries
of her world, the walls of her prison, in wonder,
not gazing through but *into*, as though trying to enter
a looking glass to touch that other person who is her
imago or resurrected self.

MERMAID

for Liz

Japanese jacket, Muslim trousers,
Elegantly amorphous black and grey,
Make all your movements vague as smoke
As you drift around the room, gaze at the spine
Of a book here, gather the dead leaves
Of the poinsettia there....
I reach to hold you, but like a dream
On waking, or a genie returned to her lamp
You disappear....

Side by side on the settee
You were too unhappy to look at me,
So you gazed at the rain drops rolling like tears
Down the window pane.
Once or twice when I glimpsed your eyes
They were the colour of faraway love
Like a mermaid's who'd lost her way.
You anointed my lips as if to cleanse them
Of all their profanities, after which
I was left with nothing much to say.
Your own lips created a crevice of warmth
To take the chill off the air
And then your sad smile filled the room
With a coral light as though we were in a grotto
Under the sea....

On the street outside you smiled again
As though you'd entered a river
And been cleansed:
Gleaming once more like a white stone
In the rain you splashed through a puddle.
Without looking back
You swam away....

STRIPTEASE

When he went down he seemed weightless
like a fouled bandage. Quietly agog
she watched. His clothes seemed empty
like the boys just wanted to beat the dust
out of them. She wondered where they had gone
the feelings she'd had that made her want
to feast on anything that came out
of him. Now nothing came out. Nothing
at all. Then she understood. It was her
they were beating. They were spanking
the feelings out of her: her feelings for him.

When they draped him over the wall
it was like pre-hoover days when grandma
spring-cleaned the carpet. What a waste of an evening
waxing her legs and getting all dolled up like this.
When he burst like a bag of breadcrumbs
she did something. As though rolling off
a durex she drew the slithery plum skin
of her hold-up down over her knee and still
its texture pleased her. The 'breadcrumbs' scraped
off like seasoning and what was underneath
was all gooey and offal bright. She wasn't much
herself. Hardly any tit. But what with the stocking
thing it worked. It was the poetry of her gesture
that caught the boys' attention, held and dazzled them.