

LEAVING

I remember walking among the horses and cattle that used to graze here. My friend Kathy and I spent the summer before high school playing in the air-raid shelters along the river. Those relics from a not so ancient war. That summer marked the end of our friendship, before we went to different schools and followed separate paths.

The fields are a housing estate now, an extension of the city sprawl. And where the cattle once trod, shoes click and clack along pavements. This is where Kathy and I exchanged vows that we would be friends forever.

It was neither fields nor houses when you and I walked here that afternoon so long ago. It was by then a landscape in transition, starkly beautiful. Spotted orchids grew in the shade of the silver birch, while tangled thickets of brambles and wild roses wove themselves around towering stands of thistle and cow parsley. In reality, it was a baneful wasteground along the river, the soil made toxic with heavy metals through years of industrial misuse.

In my mind I have often returned here, and my memory of this place has remained unaltered. Yet as I stand here now among the shops and houses, I find no vestige of the paths we took that day. This place of bricks and concrete mocks my memory.

Have I made ghosts of us over these many lost years? Are we a presence that lingers here, to be felt by those who sense such things? I feel it must be so. Will I see us if I stay here long enough?

I don't really recollect much of that distant afternoon at all. I'm not even certain what time of year it was, though I suppose it was late summer. The weather must have been kind, as I remember the sleeveless blue dress I wore – and why I was wearing it.

What did we talk about? Nothing of consequence, I'm sure. Maybe we didn't really speak at all. Certainly we spoke nothing of our feelings, of what we were doing, or where we were going.

Under the indifferent stare of the watchful pylons that strode across that poisoned land, we made love to each other.

I remember your kisses, your soft breath on my neck, the touch of your fingers caressing my back, lighting me with fire. I remember the weight of my breasts as they pressed against your chest, the smell of your warm, smooth skin, the shape and strength of your beautiful body under my hands. I remember your lovely face.

I see now that this day marked the end of us. Did we know then that you were going to leave me? I could feel that something in you had changed, but I pushed it away. That day I wanted to feel only love and desire. I would leave the ache of loss for another time, not this day.

It took you months to leave me, slowly distancing yourself with an awkward, painful savagery. And when you finally did, it was in the cruellest way. You tried to make me hate you. You forced our last words to fall from my embittered lips, filling my shattered heart with a sorrow it was never meant to bear.