The Beginning and the End

Falling

It is hard to tell a love story
and also the story of a people
being torn apart.

But this is what was happening in 1847:
I was falling in love
when everything
around me was
falling
down.

I look back with guilt and sorrow
but mostly hope.

Because it is true that love wins.

True love wins
even in the face of death.

And it will guide us.

Part 1
July 1846

The Big House

Maggie Kennedy opens the door,
takes one look at my mucky skirt and boots
and smacks me flat across the face.
'How dare you come to my door like a dirty pig.'

I step back,
brush myself off.

The dogs behind her bark and growl,
teeth bared.

But it's raining,
and standing outside only makes me
more bedraggled.
'I was clean when I set off, Maggie. I'm sorry.'

She lifts her hand to hit me again,
but wipes her thick fingers
on her apron instead.
'My name is Mrs Kennedy, you cheeky brat.
And I couldn't give a heifer's tit
what you looked like this morning.
You're not to come to this house in that state again.
D'ya hear me?

Because it's *my* neck on the line
if Lord Wicken sees you in a state.'

I nod.

A trickle of summer rainwater
runs
down
my
back.

'Get in here.'
She grabs my arm,
        drags me into the kitchen,
which is larger than our whole cottage.

I've never been inside
The Big House before.

Maggie gives me a moment to take it in:
the smell of boiling ham and fresh bread,
four large pots burbling on the range,
        their lids tinkling.

In the centre of the room is a
                long table,

a bench on either side
and rows of cupboards and shelves
packed with jars of jams and pickles,
sauces and flour.

I've never seen so much food in my life.

My stomach growls.
I only had a small mug
of milk this morning.

Maggie puts her lips to my ear.
'If you pinch so much as a grain of wheat,
the landlord will have you whipped.
And I won't feel one bit sorry.
D'ya understand?'

I nod again.

I understand.
Whatever is in this house
or within one thousand acres of the grounds
belongs to the landlord,
and we cheat him at our peril.

Maggie hands me a bucket.

‘Now scrub that floor you’ve muddied.
When it’s clean, I want it polished.
And tie back your hair like a Christian.’