

The Waters and the Wild



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Penguin Random House UK

First published 2025

001

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The extract in the epigraph is from 'The Stolen Child' by W. B. Yeats, published in *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems*, Kegan Paul & Co, 1889.

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Text design by Michelle Brackenborough
Printed and bound in China

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–65643–3

All correspondence to:
Puffin Books
Penguin Random House Children's
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

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For Nick – singer of silly songs, weaver of fantastic stories, breaker of walls (real and imaginary) and the best partner and dad in all the worlds.



Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

W. B. Yeats (1889)


Arizona, ten years ago



Dad, tell me again
about the horse and the fire,
the fairies and the woods.

The Sídhe, sweetheart.
Not fairies, not really.

Do they have wings?
Can they grant me wishes?
If I ask nicely will they cover me in dust
so I can fly?

Hush now, Rowan.
They aren't what you think they are.
Irish fairies are different;
our stories are different.
Here, heat shimmers,
waves of light,
red,
orange,
the colours clear.
Nothing is hidden;
the sun tells every secret,
honest and true,
lighting the trails and paths through the desert.

But in Ireland a story can have many faces.
Like the weather, it can be
grey,
star-kissed,
misty or bright,
deep shadow or gentle sun.

What do they look like, Dad?

They look like me and you.
They can be trees and leaves,
shadows in the corner of your eyes.

Can they be a horse?

Oh, absolutely.
A horse is the Púca's favourite form.
But it can be anything;
a bird, a hare, even a spider.
The Púca loves to change shape.

Did you ever see one?

Only once.

On Halloween night, behind the bonfire.
Its eyes glowed in the flames
but no one else saw it.
Only me.

Were you scared?

Rowan,
it was the most beautiful and terrifying thing
I have ever seen.


Ireland, present

I thought summer would be hot here,
or at least warm in a place like this,
where the valley stretches below the town,
green and thick.
The river folds
        back
and
        forth,
teasing with its burbles and wakes.
Dad always said Ireland wasn't like the movies,
all rainbows and sun-soaked green fields.
He said it was cold, rainy,

damp.

To a girl raised in the Arizona desert
that sounded magical,
and I didn't believe him,
not really.

When I was little
I always wanted to visit,
follow the map Dad drew for me when I was eight.
        Maybe someday.

It always made him sad,
remembering,
so I stopped asking.

But now we're here,
now Dad is gone,
his funeral over, buried in the churchyard
in the town where he started,
the town he left behind.

We've moved our whole lives
but Mom still won't tell me why;
        why we brought him back,
        why we are now strangers,
        outsiders,
                in a place he left behind.

It feels like our lives stopped too
        the moment he
        died.

1

Rowan!
Come get your toast.
I'm late!

Mom shouts from the kitchen,
thumping wood into the woodstove that's always burning,
even now at the end of August.

I pull on an extra pair of socks,
the giant fleece robe I got for Christmas,
shuffle down the hall.

You can make your own tea,
kettle's boiled.
I'm off.
Don't want to miss the train;
it was early yesterday.

And late last night,
I mutter, but she doesn't hear.
Not that I mind that much;

I've got used to being on my own.

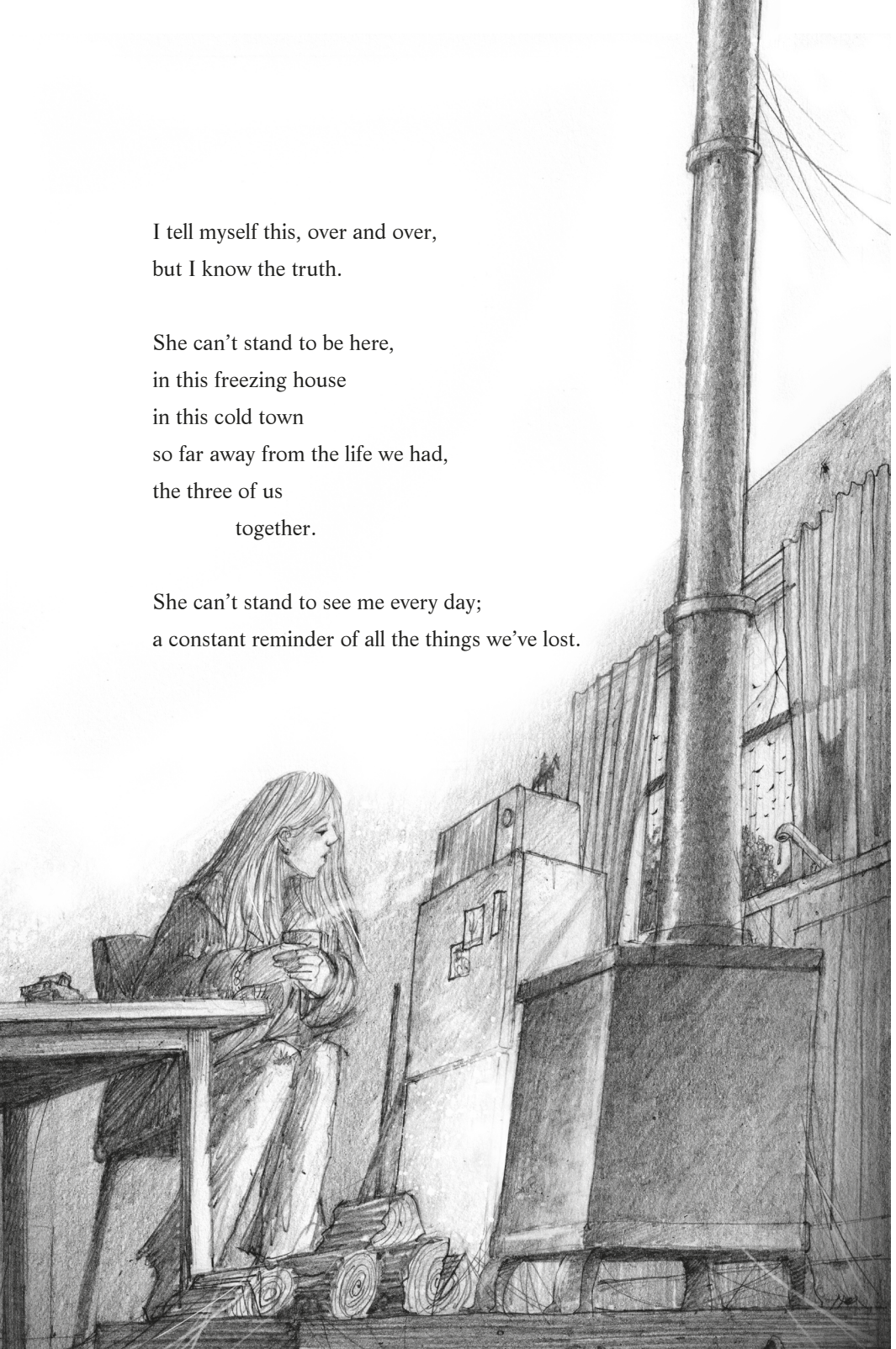
It's still summer.
It's still summer.
It's still summer.

I chant it over and over,
inhale the steam, take a sip.

But really, who am I kidding?
School starts in two weeks
and summer'll be gone.

The kitchen table is close to the woodstove,
the edge slightly singed.
I hold my mug of tea tight,
the heat warming my hands.

Mom's a doctor, always on call.
She can't help it,
she would stay with me if she could
instead of leaving me
alone
all the time.



I tell myself this, over and over,
but I know the truth.

She can't stand to be here,
in this freezing house
in this cold town
so far away from the life we had,
the three of us
together.

She can't stand to see me every day;
a constant reminder of all the things we've lost.

2

Before,
we did everything together,
the three of us.

But when Mom was working
it was just me and Dad.

After school
I would climb into his
blue pickup.
You could hear it rumble and squeak
all the way to the school gates.

The truck always smelled like him:
cedar and coconut, like the woods after rain.

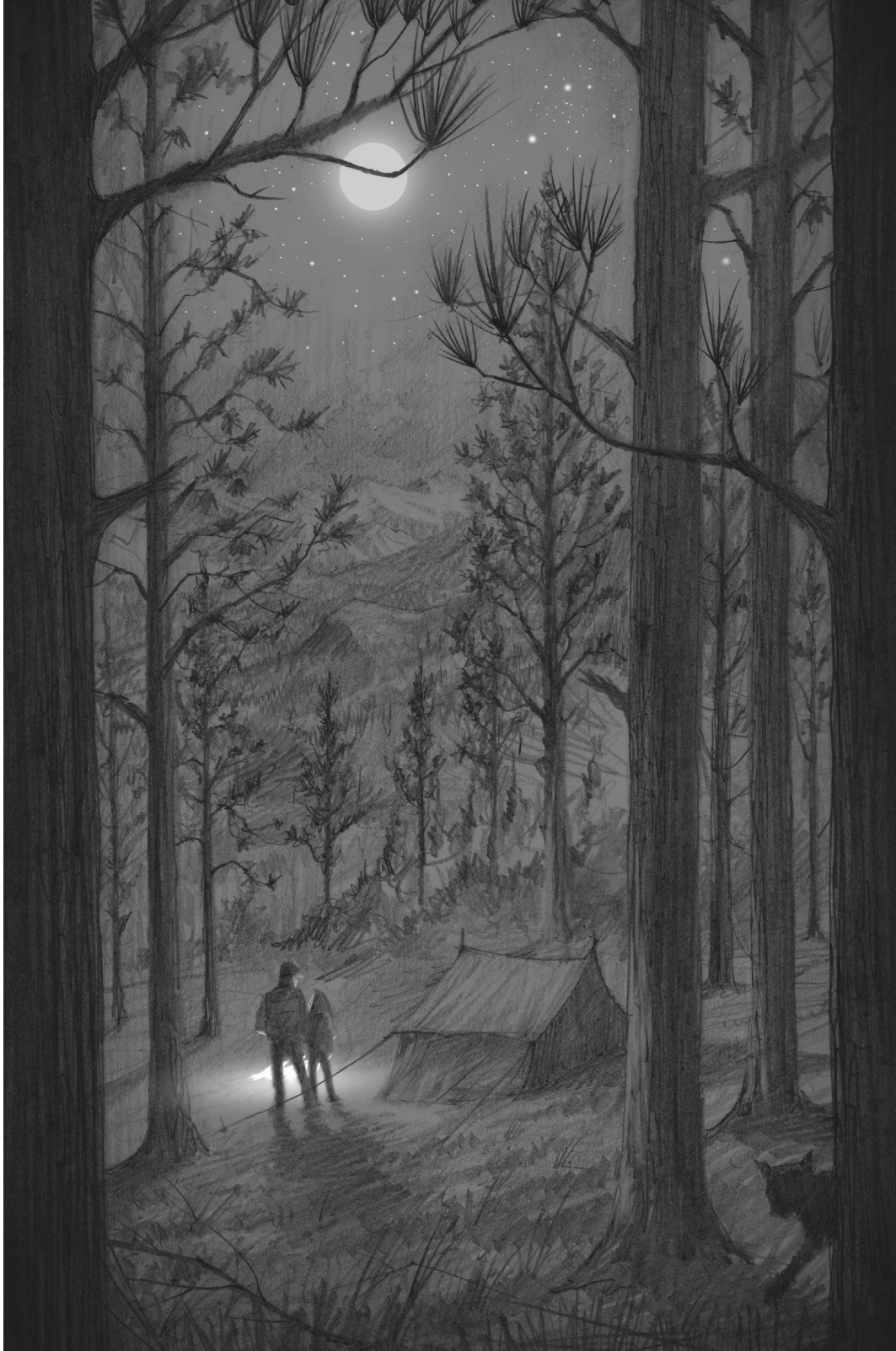
He'd hand me my boots,
hard hat
and a cherry pie from the gas station.
We'd go straight to the barn a few miles out of town.

He'd move between stalls petting the horses,
sneaking them apples and carrots
when the instructors weren't looking,
while I tacked up for my lessons.

The horses knew him;
they'd whinny when he came through the door.

Some weekends
he would borrow an old horse from the stable,
Banjo,
and we would ride the trails into the hills
        together,
the hot Arizona sun beating down on our backs,
the smell of horse sweat and leather mingling with
prickly pear and sagebrush.

In summer,
when the sun was too hot,
we drove to the mountains,
my favourite place in the world.
Hiked into the forests,
        camped under the stars.



As we walked, higher and higher,
I'd watch the light filter through leaves,
golden on the path,
inhale the deep scent of pine and sap,
listen to the birds calling,
sometimes the far-off cry of a coyote.
He always told me to keep
my eyes and ears open,
to listen with all my senses.
Remember what you see,
and see everything.
There is so much to know
in the detail.

It's where we belong,
under the cool canopy
of juniper
and fir
and stars
and sky.

Dad told stories out on the trails.
When we got home I would write them down,
try to remember everything he said.

Most were silly,
funny stories about growing up in Ireland.
Sometimes he would tell legends
of ancient heroes,
gods,
goddesses.
Cú Chulainn, Fionn MacCool,
the Tuatha Dé Danann,
the Morrígan.

The night he died
I collected all my notebooks,
threw them into a bag,
stepped out into the backyard
and piled them beneath the old saguaro cactus.



I didn't feel anything
when I flicked
the match.

The flames ate every word we had written
together.

Mom tried to put out the fire,
but all that was left was
ash.

The next day
I kicked sand and dirt on top;
buried it beneath the hot, spring sun.

A week later we were in Ireland for the funeral.

3

Everyone was there,
or at least that's what they told me.
The whole town gathered
to lower the urn into the earth.

When we went from the churchyard
to the pub,
the afters they called it,
I sat in a corner,
trying to shake an uneasiness,
a chill under my skin.

Every now and then
someone would tap me on the shoulder.
But when I turned to look
no one was there.

Eventually Mom came over,
flopped on to the seat next to me.

We're staying.
We can't go back.

We can't leave him
alone.

I think I shrugged;
what did it matter anyway?

People kept shaking my hand,
saying how sorry they were,
how young he was.

I just focused on the glass in front of me,
my head nodding,
saying *thank you for coming*,
like Mom told me to.

They acted like they knew me,
like they knew what I was going through.
But they hadn't seen him in years.
How could they
understand us and our loss?

After we unpacked our stuff,
settled into our new house,
I wanted it to feel like
new beginnings,
a fresh start.

But it was like diving head first
into a thousand reminders.

Being in a town full of people who talk like him,
remember him,
act like he's still alive in the stories they tell.

How can I not miss him every day
when they won't let me forget?

I didn't want to think about Dad,
so I started looking around,
paying attention to
the town,
        the people –
anything other than sadness.
        Anything other than him.

And that's when it began.
When I opened my eyes to everything else.
When I got out of my own head and looked around.
At the cold,
        the wet,
                the town itself
perched
on the top of the hill.

When I felt the heaviness in the air,
weighing me down, like wading through mud
with every step.

Dad's stories started coming back.
Not the ones I had burned –
different ones,
scarier ones,
about the Sídhe
and the creatures of the Otherworld.

They floated into my head,
like tiny tumbleweeds blowing through,
bits and pieces that had been there
collecting dust
for years.

And as I started to remember,
to notice,
that's when I *really* saw

the Wall.