



VINTAGE

THURSBITCH
ALAN GARNER

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About the Book

HERE JOHN TURNER WAS CAST AWAY IN A HEAVY SNOW STORM IN THE NIGHT IN OR ABOUT THE YEAR 1755.

THE PRINT OF A WOMAN'S SHOE WAS FOUND BY HIS SIDE IN THE SNOW WHERE HE LAY DEAD.

This enigmatic memorial stone, high on the bank of a prehistoric Pennine track in Cheshire, is a mystery that lives on in the hill farms today.

John Turner was a packman. With his train of horses he carried salt and silk, travelling distances incomprehensible to his ancient community. In this visionary tale, John brings ideas as well as gifts, which have come, from market town to market town, from places as distant as the campfires of the Silk Road. John Turner's death in the eighteenth century leaves an emotional charge which, in the twenty-first century, Ian and Sal find affects their relationship, challenging the perceptions they have of themselves and of each other. *Thursbitch* is rooted in a verifiable place. It is an evocation of the lives and the language of all people who are called to the valley of Thursbitch.

About the Author

Alan Garner is one of Britain's outstanding authors. He has won many prizes for his writing and in 2001 was awarded the OBE for services to literature. His books include *The Owl Service* (which won the *Guardian* Award and the Carnegie Medal), *Red Shift* and *The Stone Book Quartet*, recognised by the Phoenix Award of America.

ALSO BY ALAN GARNER

Fiction

Strandloper

Essays

The Voice that Thunders

For Tatiana Dobronitskaya
&
Richard Morris

Thursbitch

Alan Garner

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

and nu wið Grendel sceal,
wið þam aglæcan ana gehegan
ðing wið þyrse.

And now I've got a bone to pick
With knacker master Grendel;
Yon Big Thing.

Beowulf: ll. 424-426

* * *

Ac ther ne was wye non so wys that the way thider couthe,
But blostrede forth as bestes ouer baches and hulles,
Til late was and longe that thie a lede mette,
Yparayled as a paynyem in pylgrimes wyse.

But no one was near as knew the next way.
They blunder about same as beasts, by the valleys and hills,
While it is gone late and long past; a lommocking youth,
A heathen in harness, they meet; he's a wandering sort of a chap.

*Piers Plowman: C. (ed. Derek
Pearsall),
Passus VII, ll. 158-161*

* * *

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling

Little Gidding: V, 25

Go back. What was must never be.

1

HE CLIMBED FROM Sooker and the snow was drifting. He held Jinney's reins to lift her, and Bryn ran round the back of Samson, Clocky and Maysey, nipping their heels so that they would not drag on the train. They passed Ormes Smithy, up Blaze Hill and along Billinge Side.

“O come all ye wych wallers as have your salt to sell.
I'll have you give good measure and skeer your vessels well.
For there's a day of reckoning, and Hell will have its share;
Old Nick will take you by your necks,
As Mossy ketched his mare.”

The wind was full in their faces and the horses were trying to tuck into the bank for shelter, but Bryn kept them from shoving their panniers against the rocks. Now it was dark and the snow was swarming into his lanthorn and he could not see for the whiteness; but he knew the road.

“Eh. Jinney. Can you tell me this poser? ‘Luke had it in front. Paul had it behind. Phoebe Mellor had it twice in the middle afore she was wed. Lads have it. Wenches don't. Yon's in life, but not in death’.”

The bells of her collar jingled as she shook her mane, but she followed his voice in the snow.

They crossed the four-went-way and began the drag up Pike Low. Here the wind filled his eyes and nostrils and he had to suck at his beard so that the hair would not be ice around his mouth. By Deaf Harry the lead horse felt it, even

though it was up the moor, and she reared, whinnying through her muzzle. He shortened the rein and patted her neck and shoulder. She was striking out with her front hooves.

“Nay, Jinney, nay, lass. Yon’s a high stone, that’s all. He can’t hurt you. He can’t move, choose what Tally Ridge’ll say. Well, not tonight he won’t.”

He braced for the top of Pike Low.

“Blood and elbows!”

The back end of Pike Low down to Blue Boar was the sharpest in all the hills, however the storm should go. If it was behind, it came round Billinge or out of Rainow hole. North, it came over Sponds. East, it mounted on Windgather. And south it upped past Shuttlingslow and along Lamaload. There was no getting from it. But Thoon was worst, and this was it.

“Oh, what a world. What a world. Summer hangs in a bag tonight, Jinney. Right enough. But we shall fettle it, shan’t we? We shall that.”

He led the train down from Pike Low by Drakeshollow; the wind and the snow still in his face.

“Eh, Jinney. Have you ever thought?”

He was talking to stop his skin from freezing in its white mask and to keep the train calm.

“Have you ever thought who made all this here? And whatever for?”

He checked to his left that he was on his track and saw a glim of light, which would be the candle in the window at Blue Boar.

“Come up, Jinney. Come up. Come up, lass. Nearly there. And what was at the start? There’s no use in asking them lot down Saltersford. They’d put a hat on a hen, they would. They’d daub a house with a hammer. They’d plough a rock, them and their ways. Them as crack on as how they know all sorts. Them as broke Jenkin.”

The horses were blowing. He had to keep talking, or they would not make the hill. But they would follow his voice. What he said did not matter; it did not matter: not to them.

“Well, that lot, once them preachifiers, once them lot gets hold, there’s neither end nor side to ’em. They must have it as how first was their roaring chap, and he was, like, borsant with being by himself. Ay. So he made all this here. But you ask ’em where the chap was agen he’d finished: did he stand or did he sit? And if he’s standing, where’s the floor? And if he’s sitting, where’s his arse? Or was he in bed or what? And they’ll land in such a festerment they’ll big dog you. I’ve seen ’em. But what right have they to tell Bull what to be doing? Them as have it all writ, and ever sin they got to shutting sky in a box of walls and stuck a lid on it same as it was a suit o’ coffin stuff, and then think as they can tell Bull, by the god!”

The anger added to his strength.

“As the fool thinks, so the bell clinks. I don’t know. Let there be light! Yay. But if there were no sun moon stars nor tickmijigs, what’s the odds? No. I’ll tell you as how a youth on market once told it me, if I understand him aright. Mind you, where he got it from, I can’t tell you. Some market else, I’ll be bound. But now then. Hearken ye. This youth, he says, at start, there were Night and Mither. That’s all it took. Night and Mither. And when Night and Mither met, it stands to reason as how there’d be these here clag-arsed journeys to be tholed. Night and Mither, Jinney; them didn’t have to own from nowhere.”

They climbed up Ewrin Lane and over Waggonshaw Brow by Buxter Stoops. As he passed through the farmyard, he saw Martha Barber at the curtain sack of her window.

“Is it you, Jagger Turner?”

“Ay, but it is, Widder Barber!”

“I thought I heard. Will you come thy ways?”

“Nay, Missis. But thank ye. If I let this lot melt I’d starve to death.”

“Hast any piddlejuice about you for such a time?”

“I have and all. Good to make a cat speak and a man dumb. Pass us your jug.”

She unbolted the door and opened it enough for her to hand him a small jug. Then she bolted the door. He filled the jug.

“Get that down you, Missis.”

She opened and closed the door at a snatch.

“I always say as how there never has been nowt like your piddlejuice, Jagger; and that’s a fact!”

“Ay, Missis! If you’re on the road all hours in these hills, you must be fit for owt, or you’ll find it’s when bum hole’s shut, fart’s gone. It’s there, you know. Oh, ah. When bum hole’s shut, fart’s gone.”

They laughed on either side of the door.

“Give us a tune, Jagger! I feel a little ditty coming on me and I’ve a flavour for to sing it.”

“Nay, Widder Barber. I must be getting down bank, and me beasts need their rest.”

He saw her shadow. She was hopping and began to dance. Her voice was uncertain at first, but then it broke forth with a strength that not even the wind could quell.

“O, the first great joy of Mary Anne
It were the joy of one:
To see her own son little Jack
To suck at her breast bone;
To suck at her breast bone the blood
From out his father’s thigh.
Euoi! Euoi! Io! Euoi!
Through all Eternity!”

“I must be getting down bank, Widder Barber! The wind’s in Thoon, and me beasts’ll be bangled if they’re not moving!”

Martha Barber was now leaping in her dance.

“The second great joy of Mary Anne
It were the joy of two:
To see her own son little Jack
Inside o’ th’ bull to go;
Inside o’ th’ bull to go for them
To shed for him to be.
Euoi! Euoi! Io! Euoi!
Through all Eternity!”

He led the team into the road and set off from Buxter Stoops on its ridge and down the bank towards Saltersford. The lane was so steep that it had cut the hill, but any shelter it gave was of no use against the snow. He waded into the drift, thrashing right and left to make a softer, wider way for the team. The hollering wind took Martha Barber’s voice from him, but the song was now in the storm itself and came to him out of Thoon’s very own mouth.

“The next great joy of Mary Anne
It were the joy of eight:
To see her own son little Jack
Go down again to Fate;
Go down again to Fate and drink
Death deeper nor the sea.
Euoi! Euoi! Io! Euoi!
Through all Eternity!”

He led them round the Nab End three-went corner, past Great Lowes; and Edward was not in bed. Now the lane was level, for the valley. He opened a pannier, took out a handful of salt and put it in his pocket. Then he closed the pannier and moved along the line of the team, rubbing the noses of each: Samson, Clocky, Maysey.

“Go thy ways, Jinney.”

He checked the buckles and bants.

“See them home, Bryn. I must do right by Nan Sarah. And by the stars. And then. Be good, Bryn.”