

LANNY

A Novel

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Graywolf Press

Also by Max Porter

Grief Is the Thing With Feathers

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Peace, my stranger is a tree
Growing naturally through all its
Discomforts, trials and emergencies
Of growth.
It is green and resolved
It breathes with anguish
Yet it releases peace, peace of mind
Growth, movement.
It walks this greening sweetness
Throughout all the earth,
Where sky and sun tender its habits
As I would yours.

Lynette Roberts, 'Green Madrigal (I)'

Dead Papa Toothwort wakes from his standing nap an acre wide and scrapes off dream dregs of bitumen glistening thick with liquid globs of litter. He lies down to hear hymns of the earth (there are none, so he hums), then he shrinks, cuts himself a mouth with a rusted ring pull and sucks up a wet skin of acid-rich mulch and fruity detritivores. He splits and wobbles, divides and reassembles, coughs up a plastic pot and a petrified condom, briefly pauses as a smashed fibreglass bath, stumbles and rips off the mask, feels his face and finds it made of long-buried tannic acid bottles. Victorian rubbish.

Tetchy Papa Toothwort should never sleep in the afternoon; he doesn't know who he is.

He wants to kill things, so he sings. It sounds slow-nothing like tarmac bubbles popping in a heatwave. His grin takes a sticky hour. Cheering up, he chatters in the voice of a cultured fool to the dry papery wings and under-bark underlings, to the marks he left here last year, to the mice and larks, voles and deer, to the quaint memory of himself as cyclically reliable, as part of the country curriculum. He slips through one grim costume after another as he rustles and

trickles and cusses his way between trees. He walks a few paces as an engineer in a Day-Glo vest. He takes a step in a dinner suit, then an Anderson shelter, then a tracksuit, then a rusted jeep bonnet, then a leather skirt, but nothing works. He pauses as an exhaust pipe, then squirms into the shape of a rabbit snare, then a pissed-on nettle into pink-strangled lamb. He plucks a blackbird from the sky and cracks open the yellow beak. He peers into the ripped face as if it were a clean pond. He flings the bird across the forest stage, stands up woodlot bare, bushy, and stamps his spalted feet. His body is a suit of bark-armour with the initials of long-dead teenage lovers carved in the surface. He clomps through the wood, wide awake and hungry for his listening.

Only one thing can cheer up crotchety Toothwort and that's his listening.

He slides across the land at precisely the speed of dusk and arrives at his favourite spot. The village sits up pretty to greet him, sponged in half-light. He climbs into the kissing gate. He is invisible and patient and about the size of a flea. He sits still. He listens. Here it is.

seedling

Human sound, tethered to his interest, dragged across the field, sucked into his great need.

Private property,
honeycomb

Gorgeous.

Shampoo in my eyes,
windfalls

A lovely time of day.

press pause, no sign of Dad, stinks in there, tilt your glass

Now it is around him, he reaches in and delicately pulls out threads, a conductor coaxing sound out of an orchestra,

planting stock

bin it then

expertly, unhurried, like time slowly acting death upon an organism, little by little, listening. He hears his village turning itself over towards its bedtime,

piss off Alan

much higher wattage, brilliant dreams,
fan-belt squeal

clean forgot milk

talking to old Peggy

every last mouthful,

weird time to be alive,

how are your knees, it's an astrology-burn not cancer

Dad's livid, more gin than tonic,

antunni's a brutal surgeon,

Dead Papa Toothwort exhales, relaxes,

lolls inside the stile, smiles and drinks it in, his English sympathy,

rocks quacking, laminate the rota,

Year 9s lost control,

Agnettia's piled on the pounds,

a sign up at Elm House,

my trusty friend Diarthoea,

quick kick-about,

original windows, nip into town, old people die,

satsuma peel down the street like a treasure trail,

interesting light,

littlesbit,

Special Delivery and Signed For are not the same thing,

countries can grow wrong,

never seen a fella more coke-fucked,

choir clashes with Benders sadly,

horrid parents,

pretty in a smudgy kind of way,

last glass then bed,

blocked drains,

Piggish ginger son who bullied our

Iranian or something,

coming in and out like the wind,

Sbetia's salted caramel rice pudding sweet Jesus I died and went to heaven
nine English pound,

he swims in it, he gobbles it up and wraps himself in it, he rubs it all over himself, he pushes it into his holes, he gargles, plays, punctuates and grazes, licks and slurps at the sound of it, wanting it fizzing on his tongue, this place of his,

apple like that, Professor says so, *quiche au vomit,*

the gate worn where she's leant on it seventy summers,

shrieking like sexed-up foxes, he's a bum-bandit,

state of the toilets, fibre-optic, put our foot down,

(he) first, fewer antibiotics healthier cows, endless moaning,

no prof

sinister old wackjob, state of that scooter, naff as shit tai,
Linda Liability,
nine blue constituents in a chain of good sense,
you or me,
begging for a lift on Friday,
more ironing than a cuppa,
little word to the wise Ken, snitters,
Marxist knitters unite, PlayStation's bust,
Dave has bucketloads of dabbias

Dead Papa Toothwort chews the noise of the
place and waits for his favourite taste, but he hasn't
got to it yet,

I was a schoolteacher so I know all about bumped heads,
there are boyish saplings girly saplings and foot-high baby brackens,

whatsup dapper two-chins,
uprooting a load of bluebells for two days of pre^{tt}iness,
Fat Pam on a scone and jam rampage,

told him buggered clutch, change channels,
useful compost, text him back,

Roy's had another attack, Yasbvi collects on week^{days},
affair enough look at his missus, over my dead body,

I saw the carers going in but Jean said they were past that point,
sturdy jasmine, twenty press-ups and a five-knuckle shuffle,

bark at me planning a month ahead,
jugs of run-off, recycling bags, tombola,

bang out of order, pay-as-you-go, simply unwelcome, brings up
toxic masculinity every single book club, El gaz pissed as a man

and then he hears it, clear and true, the lovely sound
of his favourite.
The boy.

It would have the head of a dolphin and the wings
of a peregrine, and it would be a storm-warning
beast, watching the weather while we sleep.

Dead Papa Toothwort hugs himself with diseased
larch arms and dribbles cuckoo spit down his chin.
He grins. The head of a dolphin and the wings of a peregrine!
Surgical yearnings invade him, he wants to chop the
village open and pull the child out. Extract him.

Young and ancient all at once, a mirror and a key.
A storm-warning beast, watching the weather . . . He listens
to the boy for a while, his bedtime thoughts, his
goodnight words to his mother, his waking mind
trickling into visionary sleep. Then Dead Papa
Toothwort leaves his spot and wanders off, chuckling,
jangling in his various skins, wearing a tarpaulin
gloaming coat, drunk on the village, ripe with feeling,
tingling with thoughts of how one thing leads to
another again and again, time and again, with no such
thing as an ending.

Pete crunched off down the driveway. He raised a backward hand and shouted:

Wednesday four o'clock. I shall be waiting!

DEAD PAPA TOOTHWORT

Dead Papa Toothwort lies underneath a nineteenth-century vicar's wife and fiddles with the roots of a yew in her pelvis. He loves the graveyard. He listens . . .

*when I die make me into fatballs for the birds,
fine so long as Jimmy's mum says so,
ten new highlighters from petty cash,
Dylan needs a dimmer switch on his terrace,
a dick that big should be on a leash,*

*open-plan kitchen, floral prints,
Tom hasn't been at all well, a whippet's good nature,
over-extended, new tractors new fences,
all pumped up and shiny like a greased pig, ten of the rubber spatulas
from the door-to-door crim, heavy limey soil,
she can't pour Guinness but we forgive that
more to ~~be~~ ^{from} the interweb, on account of her titties,
what will kill Brian Gould is old-fashioned self-pity*

Dead Papa Toothwort remembers
when they built this church,

*compline and meditation, he's a fool to do it on the bank holiday,
I haven't seen it yet Jan but I am grateful for the prior warning,
rotting mouse, biotech my arse I kill pigs for a living,
wife-swap pampas grass, hence the moniker
Mad Jean,*

Dr Horvaib has seen to my haemorrhoids,
 I'm apocalyptic about the bees,
 salt of the earth,
 oi va voi here comes creepy Da Vinci
 lice again,
 Trinidadian but everyone
 assumes Jamaican,
 shiny new car, scruple-free human, nowhere to park,
 hedges will be that man's Achilles heel,
 fresh out of Silk Cut,

stone from afar, flint from round here, timber
 from these very woods, local boys, bring down the
 bodgers and set them to pews, set them to floral
 ornaments, a hymn board with ivy corners, an altar
 table with — yes indeed, there he is, a Green Man's
 head, grinning at the baptised and married, the bored
 and the dead, biting down on limewood belladonna,

vomit behind the hall,
 parochial representatives of the laity or gossips as I call them,
 wando-legend Margaret,
 on the market seven months, talking to Peggy for hours,
 half a dozen dogshit bins, everyone knows everyone,
 a whole country with short-man complex,
 the news is not good on Tom's scare, Gyppo alert, we raised £45.67,
 it's not Julie it's Jolie would you believe,
 the smell of that Philadelphus god almighty,

cheers for that Ma, stout gives me the runs,
 snogging like starving goblins,
 no more cynicism thank you gentlemen, my arm smelt of moss,
 someone is regularly crying themselves to sleep in Thackeray House,
 was woodland once
 will be woodland again,
 pretentious prick,
 discount
 you'll have a stampede,
 beautifully presented Victorian house with views of the idyllic
 Stowely wildflower meadow,

mind of a child

He has been represented on keystones,
 decorative stencils, tattoos, the cricket club logo, he
 has been every English trinket and trash, moral for
 cash, mascot and curse. He has been in story form
 in every bedroom of every house of this place. He is
 in them like water. Animal, vegetable, mineral. They
 build new homes, cutting into his belt, and he pops
 up adapted, to scare and define. In this place he is as
 old as time.

The boy does well with charcoal. Likes the way it smudges.

Making shadows, he says.

We go back and experiment, printing with skeletal leaves, where insects and time have stripped away we build with ink, we drip and dip and make a decent new mess.

Often as he works Lanny says strange and wonderful things, mumbblings, puzzling things for a child to say –

I'm a million cameras, even when I'm sleeping, clicking, clicking, every second something is growing and changing. We are little arrogant flashes in a grand magnificent scheme.

I burst out laughing.

You what? Where did you get that from?

Not sure, he says.

He tilts his head and some half-formed secret thing skips out of his mouth and disappears into the space between us.

Times like this Lanny seems almost possessed.

DEAD PAPA TOOTHWORT

He has some rules, like never trust cats, never kiss a badger, always lick a new flavour pesticide, only eat what yields to a twist, and always make sure at the summer fête to get amongst the folk who dress up as Toothwort. Every year in the costumes, in the posture, in the ligaments and juices of his worshippers, he himself must move

*hideous racket, thought they could sell the old barn,
odd couple, Rodney is a liar darling,
the bastard came down in the storm, egg on your face,*

*Shritia suggested his dog's called Sir Walker Raleigh,
second week in August, sort of a silty residue, posh twat,
I went into town, Skivey Nick's been fired, creepy little single child,
deregulation is never the rural way, skylark population dwindling,
it's us ^{we} serve ^{them} and it's always been thus,*

*what next Polish adverts in the parish mag,
gazing up at the sky like she can't bear the sight of us,
Mark smelt of rivery, we don't welcome hobbyists Malcolm,*

thirsty work listening to
all this, more talk than ever, he is so thirsty from
watching all the adorable decomposition and keeping
up with all the grinding lyric-practical nonsense of
their days,

a sort of *backpacked round Asia and came back as much of a what as he left,*
belch-like yelp, throw a muntjac onto the bonfire,
solar panels my arse, *Uncle Phil the freemason-slash-fascist,*
a lemonade top not a bloody shandy, *fancy netting,*
we can't do Stoppard two years running,

trust him with your kid, *no insurance no exchange amigo,*
man so sick of Trappy beats,

see if we get any rain, *a crevice not a pothole,*

I said as much at the Easter meeting, chompy Ron,

let us resurrect happy hardcore meine Schwester,
no biscuits scandal at the stay and play,

dreams of meeting a celebrity, pills and powders Saturday,

making little lamps for Diwali, Ivy is the enemy of old walls,

Guinness for Paul Cider for Barnsey and a Stella for me,

He peers into the kitchen of the boy's house
and watches the child drinking milk and he sees
the cold liquid pouring into the boy's belly, trickle
puddle pond lake, into the cellular cathedrals of
his organs, into his bones. Dead Papa Toothwort is
drunk on the hydration and nourishment of the boy.
Glorious, he sings, as he swings his way back into the
woods, flinging himself in thirty-foot arcs between
telegraph poles, dressed as a barn owl with car-tyre
arms, *Glorious trick of the spectis.*

LANNY'S MUM

Robert said I should try again to offer Pete some money.
We argued about it.

He brought it up at a dinner party with Greg and Sally.
Tell me, he said, is it or is it not weird that Mad Pete is
giving free art lessons to Lanny?

Don't call him that, I said, because I think it's horrid,
and I dislike the cruelty Robert performs when he's
drinking, when he is showing off to friends.

I vote totally weird, said Sally.

I vote not in the slightest bit weird, said Greg. He's
Peter Blythe, he was pretty famous back in the day, so
you're getting a bargain. And if they get on well, and
he needs the company, go for it.

'Needs the company' is exactly why it's not right. It's
unprofessional, said Sally.

Exactly, says Robert, waving his expensive salad tongs.
Who needs the company? Are we lending out our son
to stave off Pete's loneliness? Like conversational meals
on wheels for sad old artists?

Oh fuck off, Robert, I said. Is it beyond your shrunken
world view to imagine that something *nice* might exist
without money ever needing to change hands?

and he's puffing on his pencil like it's a Gauloise in a holder and he says,

Halloo, my name's Barbara and I am much nicer than my 'orrible sisters.

I guffawspit beer all over the nice outlines of plums I've drawn.

DEAD PAPA TOOTHWORT

He is in and out of shadow, moss-socks, pebble-dash skin, peering in the village hall looking at pictures of himself in the yearly competition. No more Jack in the green ale-tap Toothworts with bushy faces, these are comedy DPTs, nasty charmless things with guns, with fangs, with knives for hands, there is one with dead rabbits tied around his waist (those were the days). But they are based on fear imported, these beasts, on TV terrors, games and comics, untouched by genuine belief. He fondly remembers how much more frightening he was when the village children drew him green and leafy, born of dark gaps in Sunday school nightmares, choked by tendrils growing out of his mouth, threat and agony growing together, tree demon, uncle and dad, king of the hawthorn and hops, harvest and hope, threat of starvation,

Say Your Prayers and Be Good Too, Or Dead Papa Toothwort Is Coming for You.

One of the pictures represents him simply as a smiling old man with a beard. It's shocking. Dead Papa Toothwort grins and whispers, *That's my boy, vandalism pure and simple,*

foreign woodpeckers, cheaper cassocks,

she was in a film with whatisname from you know and he works in finance,

Willis sisters didn't get the myxomatosis memo, never actually did

another tidy premium bond ^{witz} an underwear,

mowing upholstery fencing you name it,

Paul's not-entirely-riveting lecture on the old colliery,

grandad, band practice you smelly tosspots, lesser-spotted council van,

someone is regularly screaming at their wife in Cobb Close,

unaccompanied minors,

Glenda and I are withdrawing our support for the bell rope renovation project,

agricultural consultancy my arse,

bumping with Oscar you should come along,

before the bypass you could watch the frogs make their merry way,

toots! plant sale in a decade,

In another picture he has

dripping stumps for hands and words curl around

him, like the quilted prayer banners they don't make

any more, for the hopeless stories of Jesus they don't

tell any more,

Chop chop, knock knock, Toothwort comes with his chopping block,

chop chop, knock knock, he'll boil your bones for his broth and stock

Yes he earns a big salary but the school is Ofsted outstanding,

toodle-pip my soaps are starting,

lord snooty comb-over and his blonde bimbo,

descended from bird-starvers, barbed wire is the only answer,

washing his Saab, berea Localā e nappa you know like shit taste,

the kid's a freak, holy communion-Eucharist-even s o n g,

bass-line bass-line it's never not jump-up time,

endless click smack whack of the Bowen kid trying to kick-flip,

gutters blocked by rotting squirrel,

I recommend sturdy Veronica for a splash of colour in your borders,

mad old coot, ^{inpromptu meeting of the watercolour society,}

jaunty little bit of topiary, ^{don't mind them if they pay their taxes,}

He leaves the village riding the smells from the

kitchens, spinning and surfing, wafting and curling,

from Jenny's lasagne to Larton's microwave stroganoff,

Derek's hotpot-for-one, such rich sauces, so much

sugar, was never so varied as this, not-very-recently-

dead meat dressed in fancy flavours, he laughs, funny

busy worker bees of the village stuffing their faces

and endlessly rebuilding and replacing things. All

they are is bags of shopping and bags of rubbish. He

takes such offence to the smell of Pam Foy's stir-in

jalfrezi sauce that he tears a bit of his nightmare skin

off and shoves it through her window. A truly horrid

dream. Sleep well Pam, he chuckles, as he floats

homeward across the field.

DEAD PAPA TOOTHWORT

Dead Papa Toothwort, local historian, seventy-fourth-generation cultural humus sifter, is giving a bright orange Fanta bottle top a tour of the village.

Keep up, chap, still lots to see.

He does the voices

(this place had a distinctive accent until quite recently, "yop buck", you can still hear it on a handful of village tongues).

He tells the fascinated plastic cap of times past.

He resuscitates tales and teases stories from the molecular memory of the village.

Chopped into the briar here, was all hazel, some holly, Danish axes, Pip lost a finger, underfoot here was the old village road, before our Black Death party, this hump is the back wall of a dwelling even I can't remember and here a notable font of not-local stone, this was all open field, Matilda rode Wilelmus here and snapped his little weapon, hedged into half-acres, small furlongs for ugly ploughs, hawthorn went in, half and half again, was a pond here, was a Roman soldier raped by his primus pilus here, was the fact of us being seven miles from the mill that defined

us, was beech to the left of me – beech to the right – beech coffin bury me – beech for my wife, ah yes those were the days, yes those pretty little black bags decorating the hedge are in fact dogshit bags courtesy of Brian and Fay and their beagles, paid our licence, paid our tax . . .

Such a beautiful place, interrupts the Fanta cap . . . BEAUTIFUL? screams Toothwort, pausing the tour, taking the form of a notable English poet with a waterproof map and a breathable turquoise jacket: Beauty is what, my semi-synthetic friend? Illness, decay and exploitation? A tapestry of small abuses, fights and littering, lake-loads of unready chemicals piped into my water bed, greed and decline, preaching teaching crying dying and walking the fucking dogs, breeding and needing and working and . . .

The Fanta lid is quietly whistling a roundhead ballad. He has stopped listening to Toothwort the bore, Toothwort the over-the-top audio guide.

Roger de St John once rode this way to look at some hedging and was heard to say 'nice run to the valley', good scope for poaching, haunted rowan moves a yard a year, Saxon boundary, concrete silage bunker, too many children for only one teacher, each year more demand for privacy, high-speed broadband, cures for limp dicks and depression, insecure boundaries, imported vegetables, nostalgia for expansion,

Dead Papa Toothwort sways in the breeze and the many-centuries-long furrows of his remembrance all tilt him towards the child; Strong Henry Beresford born 1426 cut down three thousand oaks in his lifetime, and the boy understands that effort and that labour. Shifty Giles Morgan born 1956, purveyor of abundant natural light for kitchens and low-impact loft conversions, he will die in his bed from rotten lungs, and the boy sees that in sequence and fairness. Runny Jenny Savage born 1694 wasn't a witch, was no such thing, was simply a curious cook, and the boy feels that too, comprehends without knowing whether they are centuries dead or alive next door. The boy understands. He builds his magical camp in the woods as a gift to them all. They should worship him! He is in tune with the permanent, can feel a community's tensile frame. Do you see? His intuition? Lanny Greentree, your miracle ribs remind me of me. Like me. Do you see? The Fanta top has gone. Toothwort is alone. He's tiny, the pulse of a robin redbreast, not even that, the empty air where a robin was earlier in the day, the atom-memory of the pulse, smaller than light.

The boy knows me.
He really truly knows me.

PETE

We're in the woods. Given the choice, Lanny will always choose the woods.
I've told him about the weird Willis sisters, growing devil rabbits in their greenhouses to spy on us.
He's come right back at me with a story about forests knowing if a person's good or bad. A decent human they'll keep alive, guiding them to water and food. A bad person they'll kill in a day, all forces of the forest united against the impure imposter.
Could say the same of a big city, I say.
I'm scratching away in my book, nice new fine-liner pen, hatching, bits and bobs, enjoying being wrapped up in my coat, drawing the beech trees' gnarled little belly-buttons, could be old hills from above, could be warts, trying to get Lanny to enjoy using a pen, not being able to rub out, he's a fanatic for rubbing out, trying to show him how you can keep on building, use the dark, wrestle a thing back if you've taken a wrong turn, I want him to enjoy making marks, I want him to let his wrist go a little bit. Hang on, where is he?

Lanny?
I am alone.

DEAD PAPA TOOTHWORT

He was crouched in the septic tank watching this and he found it very pleasing. He saw in it an aspect of himself, of his part in things. He watched the boy's mum mashing a hedgehog, turning panic-stricken animal into watery blood-spike soup, and he loved it very much, same as Mrs Larton stamping on a poisoned mouse to finish it off, same as John and Oliver shooting jackdaws at the tip, same as Jean drowning wasps in her jam-trap. One day as good as any in the human war against others. He loved the foot-and-mouth culls and spent those months slipping in and out of burning livestock; nothing new to Toothwort, veteran witness of the bovine burcs, the flus, the wonderful rinderpest, rain rot and sheep scab, the cycles of mange, mastitis and pox, he's seen things die in thousands of ways, *bit of spindle,* *septic splinter, dropped stitch, dieback won by the 90s, Red Bull burp,* *I beg you don't sign outside the box or I'll have to start all over again,* *those books where you choose your own ending,* *sharp debris,* *one in The Bell before quiz bang wallop,* *culling isn't the answer, speak English you prick,* *same ten ghosts, slowly poisoned by toxic yew,* *it's a marriage built on lies, Dad's Taxis at your service,* *nothing says cheapskate or bell-end like a yellow beamer motorsport,* *contaminated water, murderously cold in the garage, so delicious to see,*

Rottweiler pups, 50p each or a strip for £2,
yes I'm threatening you son,

He loves it when a lamb gets stuck being born, when man and ewe and lamb are all suspended, reckoning with the terrible joke of the flesh and the rubbery links between life and death,

all wild things fear the smell of human beings,

Nobody wants a by-election, came home stinking of fags, mysterious footsteps,
god knows what goes on, moonlight sonata and a cigar, Jean Coombe
jab clinic over-booked, while you snooze he nicks your shoes,
was hurt as a child,
coming for our jobs, wicketkeeper first and a barrister second,
my pockmarked arse off, her carrot and coriander soup was the star
of Lenten lunch,

foot-deep in rotten animal bones, nobody says that word any more Dad,
let him know there's danger,

if you could just peel it back and let me get a peek at the sore bit,
nine beers three shots, his you-know-what smelt of a wheatele bin
choke on hawthorn haws, ruthless pruning
past his bedtime

Dead Papa Toothwort has seen monks executed on this land, seen witches drowned, seen industrial slaughter of animals, seen men beat each other senseless, seen bodies abused and violated, seen people hurt their closest, harm themselves, plot and worry or panic and rage, and the same can be said of the earth. He has seen the land itself cut apart, its top layer disembowelled, stripped and re-plundered,

sliced into tinier pieces by wire, hedges and law. He has seen it poisoned by chemicals. He has seen it outlive its surgeons, worshippers and attackers. It holds firm and survives the village again and again and he loves it. He wouldn't do well in a wilderness.

PETE

She asked if I could do her a favour. If I could pick him up after school from his mate Alfie's house on Chalkpit Lane. Robert was away on business, trebling invisible fortunes or whatever it is he does.

Alfie's mum Charlotte is one of those health and safety types and regards me as smelly and dangerous. She's surely googled me and knows I was once famous for filling a gallery with painted wooden dicks. Her life insurance policy is probably more expensive due to the dangerous proximity of creativity to her neat detached house with underfloor heating and wipe-clean walls.

No offence intended, Peter, she said, not inviting me in, but I think I should just check with Lanny's mother.

She's in London meeting with her publisher, I said. I am instructed to feed Lanny and drop him home at bedtime when his father will be home.

I'm sure that's right, Peter, but let's check shall we?

Yes *let's*, I said.

I shan't lie, I developed a powerful dislike of Charlotte in the time it took for her to go and phone Lanny's mum, and then bring Lanny to the door, *coat/shoes/rucksack/see y'Alfie/see ya Lanny*, not because of her

That's very nice. I'm pleased with that as a thing to
look forward to.

Me too.

I love you Lanny.

I know you do.

DEAD PAPA TOOTHWORT

He sits gorged in his favourite stile, wearing a
worried knot for a face,

*a so-called mini-break, murderous temper,
inexplicitly drank anti-freeze, we warned them,
nice slow shag and a lie-in, colour like dead-for-three-days green,
what will kill Sandy Cleverdon is old-fashioned
swifty burned alive, unhealthy intention,
rotting logs,
fractured jaw and minor bruising,*

Dead Papa Toothwort knows himself, and he
has felt the tightening-itch, and now is the time,

*blinding yellow oilseed rape, hunt for that ~~what~~ ~~the~~ ~~will~~ ~~grow~~
go-zing, city baby, ^{so we hunt for the runt with a bow, no breathing rooth,}
funny turtle ~~ella~~ but is it any wonder, hit and run,
a whole basket of ~~death-robbery~~ party, garden waste*

he crawls towards the living, climbs
under Spring Lane and washes along so he can come
right up under the village street, so he can float
belly-up under them and sip the bath water and shit,
fat-clumps and grit, a dark attentive voyeur,

*bell-ringing practice moves to 5.30 pm,
nothing much ~~mate~~
nothing ~~quite~~ ~~made~~ usual bollocks, locked out of his own life,
night horrors again poor lamb, sour-breath,*

play Lord I just can't keep from crying sometimes,

we told her to be ^{random acts of aggression} ~~domino~~ forecast,
shitty day ^{and} ~~the~~ ^{spat}, ^{but}ter, just the air in the pipes,
border disaster, ^{denied her disability allowance,}
spooked, ^{badger path,}
vee'ding scabs,

up into the sinks, shower-
heads and toilet bowls, he allows himself some
intruding, some peeping, some tasting,

mouldy turnips and swedes,
properly freaked out on the walk home,
fox blood, ^{won't smoke squalids only green,}
hazel seemed to shrink, ^{human bones in the walls,}
he's a heathen, ^{things our land,} had no Wasp-E-z-e,
^{is our land}

every hundred years or so it gets like this, he
can't resist, he feels it coming, he needs to act,

proper towing ^{ab a bit,}
deathwatch beetles clicking in the beams,
left out so it soured, ^{suspect behaviour, oily grin,}
vicious ^{something not right,}
vicious cycle of unfairness, ^{nothing doing,}

every now and then he does it, puts on a show,
intervenes, changes the nature of the place,

stack of old homemade jazz-mags,
three courses and house wine,

dart I suggest he get an effing job and vacate that bar stool,
myths exist for a reason,

we will begin with Psalm 37,
^{burn it, something's off,}
most precious possession,
a nation of ^{rotten} ~~rotten~~ ^{souls} ~~souls~~
^{sobbing in the bus shelter,}
sleep paralysis, ten of us in Sreie's Corsa,

he can't resist and never could, he can't resist and
never should,

^{shall we say} ^{eco-conservative and worry about the logo another time}
might my love, dark times,
cola bottles and flying saucers,
fright of ^{my} ^{life} ^{spontaneously} ^{disappear,} ^{lip-synch}
^{boys will be boys, clogged up with old hair,}
an Englishman has to blurt or be ^{blurred}
frightened pets,
face like a bag of melted anus mate,
shame on them ^{for} ^{all} ^{them} ^{all} ^{godless} ^{ferret-handling} ^{manipulator}
^{shame on them} ^{for} ^{all} ^{them} ^{all} ^{godless} ^{ferret-handling} ^{manipulator}
^{kids have sick ideas, burning scrub,}
people are weird, alright,
^{be stronger feeling} ^{now I} ^{say}

he is up to something.

DEAD PAPA TOOTHWORT

Dead Papa Toothwort steps up from a brown puddle and walks through the village dressed like a normal bloke, flat cap, rain mac and sensible boots, out for an evening stroll. He whistles his song, and the song is a set of private instructions. He feeds his plan into this ordinary home-county place, sliding it like lubricated wire into the soft flesh of the village, into buildings, gardens, sewage pipes and water tanks, up the lane to the big house, round the back to the sports pitch, into the beer pumps, into the books in the classrooms, into the gas and electric, into the bell in the church tower, sucked into nostrils, rubbed into cotton, into the bodies of men and women, folded into sweaty creases and scratched into red eyes, into the dreams of the children and the bones of sleeping house-beasts, and he whistles and whistles and gives so much he can hardly hold any idea of himself together. Exhausting.

He has done this before but never with such sincerity. He means this terrible thing. He's meant it forever. He makes a once-in-a-century effort, whistling his dream into being, setting the village up for its big moment. By the time he gets to the edge of the woods he has crumpled into nothing more

than a whiff or a suggestion, he is only silent warm crepuscular danger, and the badgers and owls have seen this before, and they know not to greet him, but to hide.