



A SHORT STORY BY **MARIA DONOVAN**

# Slaughterhouse Field

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A response in fiction to  
Margiad Evans' *Turf or Stone*

ILLUSTRATION BY **JAMIE HAMLEY**

# BACKGROUND

## **ENGLISH-BORN PEGGY WHISTLER FOUND HER RIGHT PLACE IN WELSH BORDER COUNTRY, WHICH PROVIDES**

the setting for her novel, *Turf or Stone*, written under her adopted name and identity of Margiad Evans. In 2010, Parthian published a Library of Wales edition, and NWR asked me to take inspiration from it for writing what became 'Slaughterhouse Field'. *Turf or Stone* was first published in 1934, the year Margiad turned twenty five: certain elements in the novel gave rise to memories and responses that formed themselves into this short story. Inspiration comes as it will: my narrator just happens to be twenty four years old. She shares many of my memories of a time spent in Holland, a place I knew well in my twenties. Like Peggy, or Margiad, I'm English-born and have lived some long time in Wales. Unlike her, I was not brought here at a young age. She was bereft when made to leave her soul country, and returned as soon as she was able. I came as a thirty-something, my identity by then as much formed by a decade in Holland and seasons in France and Spain, as by my childhood in the wilds of Dorset. Perhaps because of these shifts between cultures and languages, I feel a kinship for her outlook.

In her novel, Margiad examines the emotional life of her characters, bringing the reader some understanding of behaviour that is often treacherous, cold, sadistic and cruel. I admire her close descriptions of the natural world and the human society she must have observed around her, as if she's determined to permanently frame a way of life passing before her eyes, dying out even as it is being lived. She creates a backcloth for the actions of her characters, seeming to feel it as important to bring to our understanding what happens, for example, on market day in a small country town as to detail Easter Probert's desire for love and belonging and his malicious acts of revenge when thwarted. Sometimes events in our past lie dormant, waiting to reveal their purpose: in my story I also record things witnessed that may never be seen again. Margiad Evans' novel shows the force of attraction arcing between people who had perhaps better remain apart, and the deep human need to be understood and accepted as well as loved. My story deals with the uncertainties of attraction, the difficulties of bridging an understanding between alien cultures. I responded also to Easter's early life among travellers, the differences of background and education between himself and his wife, Mary, and a life lived on the margins of poverty and affluence. I wanted to say something about the mutual understanding and bewilderment that can aid and bar complicity. My narrator is set down among the landmarks of memory, alongside people bolstered and inhibited by their traditions. There is hope of love and fear of being mistaken. Time, place and certain events form the underlying pattern of my story: the rest is fiction and embroidery. **Maria Donovan**

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**THE TRAVELLERS SAY WE CAN LIVE NEAR THEM, BESIDE THE RED-WALLED SLAUGHTERHOUSE. IT IS NOT THEIR** field – their caravans occupy the dead-end road by the slaughterhouse gates – but driving in or out we will always be passing by their doors and windows. We are glad because our big old bulb-field on the far side of the city of Haarlem is being taken for houses, 117 new homes, and we have nowhere else to go. A planning officer has said to us, ‘What if everyone wanted to live like you?’ We tell this to our new neighbours, and all laugh at it together.

They are one or two families, three or four generations, perhaps having taken to caravans after the war; they don’t seem to remember. We are a bunch of friends, not one of us born to the life on wheels except for my cat, Henkie. In his three years of life the wagon has not moved before.

They will share with us the water tap and the broken pallets the men inside the slaughterhouse throw over the fence for us to knock apart with sledgehammers and burn; the meaty bones flung to our dogs to be stripped bare and rolled in the dust; the day-long *kerdunk-kerdunk* sounding from deep inside the compound: we shiver in case it marks the steady mechanical killing of beasts, knowing it more likely to be the stapling of boxes.

We would have liked to share the use of the toilet block built for them by the council, but every last bowl has been either blocked or broken.

Still, we have the field, a good-sized piece of ground bordered at the far end by the back of a row of shops and houses. Behind us, a canal and another field, home to a steady Norwegian fjord horse called Bob. His owner, a burly man with terrific moustaches, comes down on his bicycle every weekend and hitches Bob to a wooden cart. If only we could ride away with him, but we are too many for any one of us to ask for such a favour.

When the Saturday comes for moving, I pack the cat into his basket, put all the breakable things on the bed, and wait for Sjon, one of their men, to come and couple his tractor to my hefty wooden wagon. Sjon looks about my age, but at 24 perhaps he thinks me old and odd, a single woman, incomplete. He has a caravan of his own by the slaughterhouse, alongside his mother and the rest of her children, as well as his uncle, who laughs and tells of ways to discourage the police. ‘Smile, and leave a nice lump of wood with a nail or two sticking out between the tyres for when they drive off.’

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I watch Sjon at work on the coupling, glad that he understands hydraulic brakes, liking his dark hair, his brown neck and arms emerging from the collar and rolled-back cuffs of his white-and-brown checked shirt, his blackened hands that know exactly what to do. 'It's taken the day to drag us all across town,' I tell him, laughing, embarrassed because most of us have not the means of moving our own homes. I ride up high with him on his tractor and everyone stares as we pass through the streets.

My wagon is the last to arrive at the slaughterhouse field. The others have already arranged themselves in a horseshoe at the far end, near the back gardens of the houses. Mine is near the slaughterhouse wall and the gate into Bob's field. From my window I can just see one end of Sjon's caravan, as well as the tap and who is out collecting water.

Sjon says little, but seems kind, only laughing softly as my cat, bristling from being kept in a basket, stalks out onto his own doorstep and shrinks away from the shift in landscape, the rip-reeling onwards of the backcloth to his world. For days poor Henkie mews angrily, won't eat, and hides under the wagon. He skulks into Bob's field, up a tree and over the fence to find meat and strange company among the stray cats of the slaughterhouse.

I am only half-settled when the kids come round, a seven-headed cluster of them hanging in the doorway. 'Can we come in?' They are already inside, telling me, 'Oh no no no. This is *all wrong*.' Nothing is to their liking: not the table and chairs, nor the double bed through the archway at one end, not even the upright piano at the other. Carefully and with gestures, they explain: 'You ought to have a coffee table *here*, with a runner *so*, an ashtray to one side, to the other an ornament.' None of our homes are like that and each threshold shocks them with a different interior. What bizarre tribe are we, not even agreeing to be like one another?

Their grown-ups do not come to us: we visit them. I go along with Piet, my friend and neighbour. Some of Sjon's family live in statics, some in tourers. They buy and sell the old-style flat top wagons with their etched glass partitions and wooden steps. Piet likes the look of one of these. It has a marble fireplace and a panel with St Joris slaying the dragon. I say he is George, the patron saint of England, and Piet says that's funny

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because he is also the patron saint of butchers. A fluffy white terrier wags its tail at us, with the air of an old family pet, much loved. Sjon's mum gives us coffee and wants to know if we're a couple. We shake our heads. Piet is gay: I leave it up to him to mention this. 'I'm single now,' I tell her. 'It's for the best.'

Sjon's mum is about 45; she wears a pale blue jumper over a protruding stomach. On her coffee table she has a red runner, a clean glass ashtray and an enormous porcelain ornament: two pink-and-white children on a pink-and-white seesaw. 'Our kids go in the tin bath every day,' she says, eyeing us in case we express a preference for dirt. 'We all do.'

I tell her I wash at home, and also take a shower at the hospital, before as well as after work: 'I don't want to smell of wood-smoke on the ward.'

'Don't like hospitals,' she says, patting her swollen abdomen.

Having done my time on maternity, I reckon her to be no less than 28 weeks pregnant.

'Terrible constipation,' she announces. 'Haven't been these last three months.'

Dubious: surely she'd be dead by now? Maybe I've misunderstood. Even after five years of speaking Dutch sometimes I still think I miss the real meaning of what's said. 'Have you seen a doctor?' I ask. A little medical knowledge is a great responsibility.

She sniffs. 'Don't hold with doctors.'

Perhaps I ought to talk to Sjon.

There is a passage from the field through to the row of shops and houses. It delivers you from our camp straight into the ordinary world. This is my quickest way to work but often I cycle the long way round past the slaughterhouse gates.

I slow down to look again at the wagon Piet likes: the white terrier trots up and I stop and bend down to stroke him. He sniffs my legs and rubs the bones of his skull against my hand. Sjon steps out and nods to me, smiling as if he is glad the dog and I are getting on so well. I rummage for something to say to him. 'How's your mum?' I try. 'How are her little birds?'

He looks blank, then, 'Oh, she don't keep them anymore. Keeps snakes now.'

I shake my head like a prizefighter with blurred vision. Only the other day she was showing me the cups she'd won with her canaries.

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‘Really?’ I ask, thinking he will crack.

‘Yeh,’ he says. ‘She’s got a python in the shed.’

For the first few weeks I can call Henkie back from the slaughterhouse, or tap a spoon against a saucer and watch him flow towards me over fences and under gates. He leaps in through the window, donking the keys of the piano on his way down. To keep him close to home I plan to get him seen to at the vet’s, but on the day of his appointment, he jumps out of the window with a last dischord. At night I hear him yowling with his mates.

Sjon’s uncle goes out with a van collecting things. Sometimes he drives onto the empty space between our caravans and theirs, unloads the stuff that can’t be sold and sets fire to it. The wind blows the smoke from burning tyres across the field. We keep our doors and windows and our mouths shut. He was doing this long before we came.

Then one Sunday we are shaken out of our beds by the sound of battle. I look out through the glass panels in my door and there is Sjon and all the men and women, and the children too, surrounding the wagon Piet has admired: four generations beating it with sledgehammers and lengths of pipe and sticks. The kids run at it, yelling. Sjon and the others batter the old caravan with full silent concentration. Its outer panels are torn off, the windows smashed. Pieces of polystyrene insulation blow between our caravans and fly past our eyes into the canal.

Piet comes running out of his truck, shouting, ‘No!’ – dressing-gown flapping, white legs bare. He runs right up, pointing and opening his mouth wide. Sjon’s uncle leans on his sledgehammer and gives him the nod so that Piet hurriedly closes his dressing-gown and ties the belt. A few minutes later they shake hands and Piet hauls away the marble fireplace. ‘It was too late for St Joris,’ he tells me later.

‘But why?’ I ask. ‘That beautiful old wagon.’

Piet shrugs and just says, ‘Woodworm.’

We pick the broken polystyrene tiles off the grass and try to fish what we can out of the canal. Bob the Norwegian fjord horse looks up when I climb over the gate into his field to chase the fluttering white pieces.

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When I've done he drops his head and carries on grazing. He has a broad back.

For a few days I don't cycle out past Sjon's caravan. I go to work the short way.

Piet thinks I'm avoiding the new dog, a Rottweiler. 'If you go close to the wall, he can't reach you,' he says. His trousers have been torn. Someone else was bitten in the leg. 'Sjon's uncle said I was cycling too fast,' says Piet. 'The dog ran after me and nipped me just as it got to the end of its chain.'

'And what about that sweet old terrier?' I ask. 'I hope he isn't hurt.'

'He's gone,' says Piet. 'A swap. Some kind of deal.'

One of our couples has decided to be married, legally, in the morning and in front of the whole tribe in the afternoon. Everyone's invited – all the neighbours. At night we have a great fire and food and drink, and our musicians play: guitars, fiddles, double bass. As a wedding gift we've hired a second band whose singer does a tap dance and a soft shoe shuffle on a long board laid out on the sandy ground. Sjon's family stands apart, seeming a little shy, but smiling, drinking the health of the happy couple, and nodding to the music. It must be better than watching telly indoors. Sjon is on the edge of his group and I am on the edge of mine. There are flames in his eyes but still a little space between us. I know I must not be the first to cross it, yet I can't move away or dance in front of him.

Sometimes we hear whole herds of sheep bleating in the slaughterhouse, then *kerdunk-kerdunk* and they are silenced. Another time it will be pigs or lowing cattle.

One day, a great commotion. A fighting bull breaks through the fence into Bob's field. We gather to watch him trotting round, black coat gleaming under the sun. He stops at the far end, long horns pointing a challenge, as if waiting for the matador. Bob paces slowly down towards our end. His owner turns up on his bike, unchains the gate, and leads Bob safely out. We all want the bull to get away, but not into our field; we want him to have his fight, but not with us. Sjon stands beside me; we are held by each other's gravity, like the earth and moon.

Perhaps the bull came all the way from Spain into this field. Sensing death, he has broken away from the others. None have joined him. He does not run towards us but looks uncertainly at the canal and the houses beyond. People are in their back gardens, testing their fences.

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‘Run away,’ I say, quietly. ‘Please run away.’

Sjon looks at me and leans closer.

We hiss when a police marksman slithers onto the roof of a shed inside the slaughterhouse compound. ‘Oh no,’ I say and grab Sjon’s arm. Gently the marksman brings his rifle round, takes aim a too-long time and shoots. The bull’s shoulders jolt, his legs fold. He does not rise again, or even kick out. The marksman waits a long time before sliding down. Sjon puts his arm around me and pulls me close before the final shot. We turn our backs when the white-clad slaughterhouse men come out to drag away the body.

Sitting on the steps of my caravan in the late afternoon sun. Sjon comes walking across the field with the Rottweiler running ahead wearing neither collar nor lead; the black-and-tan beast runs right up to me, sucks drool from his black jowls, and puts his two front paws either side of me on the third step, to stand over me, head blocking out the sky. I can look up and see the roof of his mouth, his tongue lolling to one side, all his teeth. ‘He wants you to rub his chest,’ says Sjon. The dog slowly turns his head from one side to the other, his brown eyes flicking me a look, but not settling on mine. I put up a hand and gently smooth the glossy skin over the wall of muscles in front of my face. ‘Be firm,’ says Sjon. ‘Don’t tickle him. He won’t bite.’

I push harder against the dog’s chest: what happens if he thinks this is a challenge, what happens if I stop? Sjon is watching me and I smile to myself and say nothing; let him see me as I am, both brave and foolish, able to turn a calm face towards those fangs, because he tells me *this* is a dog that doesn’t bite.

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**Maria Donovan** is living in Cardiff and writing a novel. Her first collection of short stories, *Pumping Up Napoleon*, is published by Seren.