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Article

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Two Poems: Two Stories

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Abstract

These two poems reflect on Sylvia Townsend Warner and her milieu. The first recalls an incident about Warner's burial and the second concerns a later tenant of a house Warner rented in the 1930s.

Keywords Warner, Chaldon, grave, Miss Green's Cottage

These two poems were written after the publication of my book on Chaldon Herring, as people continued to tell me tales. The first, strange, episode was related to me one evening by Colin House, who had been responsible for replacing Sylvia's stone after her name was added to it.¹ The second story came from Chaldon villager Betty Miller, who had nursed May Pitman. May and her husband Jim were Sylvia's tenants at Miss Green's cottage and were blown out, unharmed, by the bomb that destroyed it in 1944. May died of tuberculosis in 1951.

Non Omnes Moriar, 1978

This village has known witches,
some fifty years ago.

Now
hares leap without artifice
friezing the fields. Over cottage doors
horseshoes disintegrate into rust.
The old crafts are gone, it seems,
The villagers are at rest.

Until they reach the grave.
Here in the churchyard the stones start
and jig, cheerfully unquiet.

She was one of their number, the numberless,
her soul's progress barred
and blocked by a pair of hinges, crossed,
from a whining farm gate.

She, May

Turning the handle, worn down to the metal,
through creamy layers of paint,
and you'll find the veranda.

(That's where my patient spends
most of her time.)

She treads those wooden boards,
Coughing, talking,
Smoking, too, I dare say.

She's like a bird caught in a net
Tearing. Cruel in her distress,
Shedding her flightiness, her fine feathers,
She's left the sanatorium.
Left it wordless.

Later on, we heard that she's also left her husband,
Taking the furniture, and only three weeks after...
I wonder what she wanted with it?
Shackling her to death.



Figure 6.1 May Pitman on her wedding day. Photo: collection of Judith Stinton

Note

- 1 The story is also related by Sara Hudston in 'The Gardener's Story': 'After the funeral service, Colin set the small memorial stone at a slight angle to let the rain run off. When he revisited the grave a few months later he found it flat on the ground. "I lifted the stone to put it back and there underneath were

two crossed hinges. It was an old Dorset curse to keep the spirit earthbound, so my father told me. I removed them and threw them over the wall. They weren't put back and to the best of my knowledge they haven't been since.'" *Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 2017, p. 45.