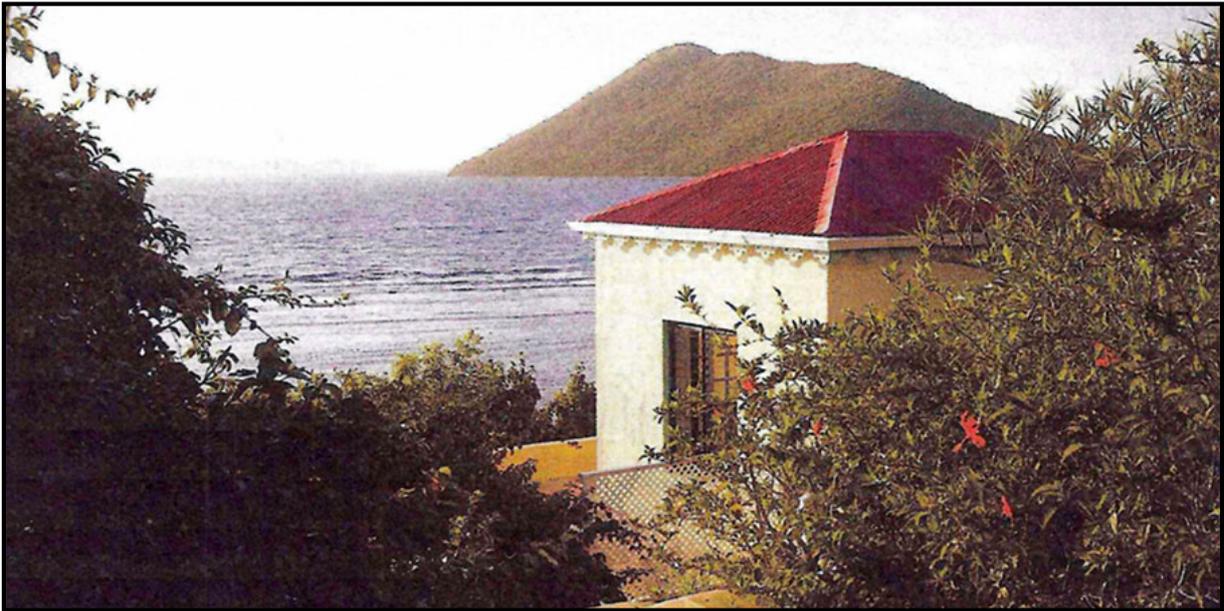


**THREE LEAVES IN COLOUR**  
A Wander in the Footsteps of Virginia Maskell



A.V. Andersen

## V Westward Ho!



Comeback to the Virgin Islands: A view from Marina Cay to the Cape of Beef, protruding from the abyss.

*We see yonder the beginning of the day, but I think we shall never see the end of it.*

As we learned, even the *Interlude* domiciles looked much like Virginia's in real life. First of all, there was that noble estate of *Antonia*'s first appearance, where she came out of the entrance to embrace Oskar while holding a stuffed Teddy (that looked more like *Sooty*); and later we saw the latter sitting abandoned on a Hollywood swing as the estranged couple passed by. I really had to rub my eyes and think about whether this little prop was Hugh's idea or Pedro's contribution (or simply my suggestive perception). Then again on her spatial tracks, I strolled around the Parsonage in summer '22 – to put my naughtiness in perspective: there's a public footpath leading right along – to find the Georgian house door (which looks sinisterly similar like that movie portico) invitingly open; so that I was hopeful (as always confusing fiction and fact) that *Antonia* would instantly step out of it – but there was just a tiny mutt barking quite persistently in a hoarse voice until the invader left the white gate on his lonesome way to Wain Hill. And in retrospect I'm not sure whether it was real or the ghostly apparition of a certain Rupert. Do you think the faithful companion is still waiting for his mistress?



Virginia wasn't granted to watch her most terrific performance due to another fatal drive on a bittercold January day after an enduring phase of psychosomatic decline and receptive reading of her fondest poet's latest work. And it's hard to believe, but literally proven that she had returned from an ominous Advent trip to the West Indies short before Christmas (like exactly a decade before). Having just been released from her asylum strains – should she really have set off for a belated honeymoon? I am sorry, but there is something odd about this plot – or am I a fool, so immersed in my paranoid paradigms that I can't follow the feelings of others? For me, her comeback to the Virgin Islands can only be explained as a sentimental farewell to that very place where all her fancy ideas were buried,

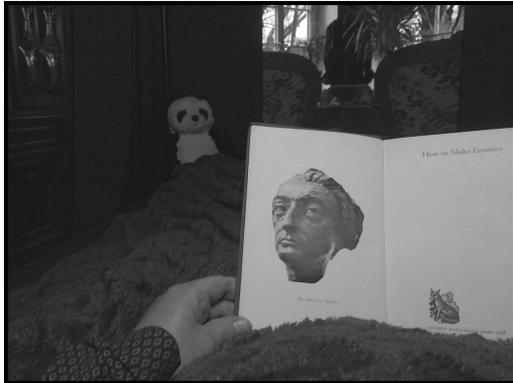
locked in a treasure chest of carefree memories on Bellamy's beach before her loss of innocence in Malcount Bay. Driven by insatiable longing to trace her Golden Age. But perhaps the spouses tried to save the status quo or even to bring about reconciliation. So that we might imagine two little freezing mice that had slipped into a crevice long ago, thawing under the Caribbean sun and making love rather than fighting their Wars of the Roses. But obviously this was counterproductive: Virginia's vessel in distress returned to England devastated, fully loaded with Silver's pills just like before, if not more. And therefore *the whole of January* would become a *black month* (as Pedro would later put it). Maybe back in the Parsonage. We have to enter the wood-panelled parlour, probably the place of her ominous last portrait which hardly seems suitable as an advertising image. Virginia is sitting in front of those bookshelves, wearing a fluffy sweater and looking like a freezing bird begging to be fondled. She is noticeably thin, has sunken cheeks and her gaze seems to be focused towards the beyond, unendingly sad. I have a really bad vibe about her physical condition, differing from Silver's statements, that she would have felt – or looked – better after her release from Manderley. To ponder about her intentions to allow herself to be depicted in this undoubtedly vulnerable state. She appears so trusting to the photographer that we tend to guess it was Thommy who took the rare photo as one of Virginia's *intimate portraits*; and perhaps he hoped he could tear her away from dark thoughts and comfort her. But rather, it looks like a visual epitaph; and we will soon learn about a literary one. I can't add the picture because I promised Rod never to share his hardly-known gem (that reached America from Amersham via winding paths). This Hollywood lad is certainly the biggest Maskell enthusiast worldwide with the largest visual archive (apart from Pedro's estate which is now preserved in Exeter along with hundreds of letters, photos and even the diaries of our late protagonist). But I have a thumbnail from the auction some years ago that I wouldn't like to withhold from the audience. The comparison to Virginia's adorable birthday portrait from 1960 is hard to stand but we have to face the gruesome reality: It clearly shows the premature decline from the light-hearted Seagull full of appetite of life to the depressed woman of fading energy (as it is similarly expressed by an unknown admirer in a certain obituary that shall be shared with you later) – and it may reveal even more.



If I can trust my bruised eyes (or the photo's harsh contrast), there is some thing wrong when looking at her veiny hand: Was Virginia's dark sapphire ring, which she had worn every single day since January '62, whether on stage or at home, not replaced by another one that was cheaply made of glass? To speculate about whole the story lurking behind the picture – whether she left her gem in a torn sock at the mantelpiece on Christmas, lost it on the shores of her quarantine isle in Hellsbury Vale, or whether she even dedicated it to the watery abyss off the Cape of Beef – *Full fathom five?*

The northwest attic – it has always been an adequate place for a decent husband to lock up his insane wife, even more so to contain her blazing fire she had brought back from the Wide Sargasso Sea (whether it came from the depths of her soul or it was kindled by Black Sam's curse, who knows). But what we know for sure is Virginia's last reading. She immersed herself into Pedro's second biography *How to Make Enemies* (and the Charming Brute knew much about this theme!). We are even able to almost certainly date it to her very last weekend since she read the tome *some weeks after it's release* (in the first week of January). That certainly means more than a fortnight; and, indeed, it needs some days to cope with the stuff about 400 pages. Virginia was seeking for a sign of affection, but first and foremost for the long awaited chapter of their shared story that she had begged him countless times over Five Long Years. As a liberation strike from her curse of speechlessness – and perhaps as an impetus to let her social bonds be broken and thus compensate for her inability to make decisions.

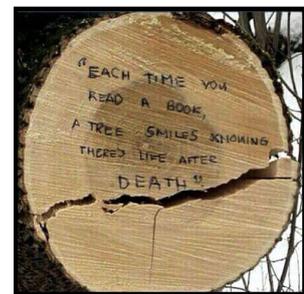
But on the contrary, she was mentioned only twice on the very last page; and what she had to learn about Pedro's love affairs with his manifold bosoms – from Ben to Mary, Antonia to Anna, or whatever their names were – was like a slap in her face. She realized her degrading state of having served as just one woman in the crowd. Ouch, that was xtremely painful! *To rage, to melt, to burn!*



So let me now imagine what you might have felt during a destructive act of method reading: First of all there had been that woman: Kathleen, your early predecessor! Do you remember her role? *Lucretia* lay in state while a grimace was staring at her, like Epstein's bronze or a pale horse. T'was an iconic scene in fiction, but soon she died prematurely in fact; and you foresaw your upcoming fate. Now you learned all about Mephisto's menagerie and how he cried the eyes out over his losses; even more in the face of his annoying choice of piclets: That running mare posed with YOUR beloved stallions (exactly like in your *Island* shots) just some years before your *time of dreams*; and Pedro stood proudly high above your personal (and whose else?) nest as a Lone Ranger as he liked to portray himself (since we know *All Men are Islands!*). Once more your Raft of Love was swept away beyond the pages, and the letters blurred together in a salty flood deeper than the Mill Leat. Then you touched his pale pic of Epstein's bronze to suddenly find that he looked similarly mischievous like another nasty artist, Tricky Dick, a certain Saxon composer and the creator of *Tristan*. The latter had landed at Boscastle pretty close to Malcount Bay centuries ago to fall into obsessed and forbidden love with Isolde; and it is well-known what became of them: They crossed the Styx in quick succession, oh that blessed couple! But as for Pedro's parentage from an African line of Mad King Lewis, you realized now at the latest that the New Byron was neither more nor less than another Fritz disguised as a Brit. Oh what a scoundrel! He had used your body and your soul and then he let you down. And you had turned down nine out of ten offers, even refrained from going abroad, preferred to be a shepherdess in Devon rather than a Hollywood actress. You had sacrificed your career for him and upset all your relatives because of your loyalty that none of them respected. To lose your path to happiness on your long *Way to the Tomb*. Not a single woman since Lady Lamb had felt so exploited and humiliated. So bitterly disappointed that Heloise *could have killed him* or *give her corpse* to that unfaithful Abelard!

But let's calm down together and speak plainly: How could you doubt his feelings? Look at these booring pages full of nasty stuff about hundred and one mistresses and Mary's brave suffering. None of them got their own poems or plays (and a full biography, albeit currently denied to you). Isn't it clear that you were the chosen one? To speak in Doyle's words: You were *THE WOMAN!* At first glance, he was overwhelmed by your bewitching appearance (despite those damn dustbin lids); that he exclaimed as if struck by lightning: *Virginia... Her name was Virginia!* And that's exactly how Leslie will express his admiration many decades later when he looks back at your joint work (me too). And Pedro conjured up the turning point of his life on that certain evening at Earls Court: *These must be the last pages of this book. For after (that incident) I was not the same man.* That sounds to me like burning longing, if not even like the early obituary for a great love – and a life, as if he had guessed or known while he wrote, lost in memories, some time before your fall of decay, that he would never be able to finish the story during your lifetime, let alone read it with you (as once the *Island* reviews) at your bed edge: *I haven't the strength now, or the courage, to write the rest.* To ponder about your true condition and whether those close to you foresaw that you would not even live to see the *Interlude* premiere. (And, indeed, Pedro will later express in an ominous sentence that he limited his mourning to *the whole of January*, so as *not to spread his grief over the entire spring.*)

However, you felt as if you were reading your own epitaph, just as darkly prophetic as when Pat had urged you to walk alone behind your hearse and to watch your bizarre burial on the tidal beach. It was certainly a trigger that stirred up your mind and made you think about: What could have been... If... you had beheaded the legitimate Queen, you would have won her realm, *his hand and his name*, to live out a lewd love and a long life (and you would have certainly scratched out the eyes of every rival and prevented them from ever touching your fondest gem with their sausage fingers). If... you had resisted Mephisto's temptations and those of all men in the world, had neither become an reluctant actress nor two unhappy wives, you could have kept your virginal Island where you had been so heavenly happy, and exchanged your hundred costumes for the one and only gown of Ursula of Tortola and her Eleven Thousand Virgins to fulfill your destiny as a noble nurse in Road Town and do something meaningful: to pour out your heart and your soul, to comfort all less fortunate, to open your arms as *Perpetua* did, as if she were taking all orphans into her embrace! *Hhow* the young fanciful girl had once dreamed; but she had only a limited will and let her wings clipped subject to reality. But if only... Pedro had revealed your true nature earlier, you could have felt good in your skin and you would never had *to mourn an unknown little boy* (to quote your poem *The Tears*). Now sadly it didn't matter since you had to face that even if you wanted it, everything was lost. Your body and brain were burnt by Ordeal's prescribed poisons. They had rotted your tongue and silenced your voice.



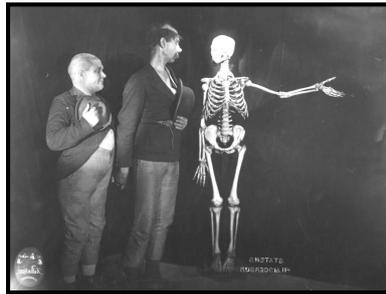
The hesitant would be painfully reminded of his failure as he sat at Virginia's bed edge with her comatose body lying in state (he might have thought of *Lucretia's* scene; but now it was bitterly real). For rather ten minutes. *Heloise and Abelard* were denied a more intimate farewell since he hadn't been there when she really needed him. But we can imagine that he gently stroked her eyebrows above her strikingly black eyes, the latter perhaps due to her trunk-hugging fury dance. To think of Hayley, that gullible girl who didn't foresee her impending fate as she danced as if in trance on a hill above the sea, that her life would become an *Endless Night* as she is slowly poisoned by those close to her. Getting drugged to push away problems instead of solving them – that's the classic case (but please forgive another digression into a movie of the '70s that sinisterly quotes *BLOW-UP* and *Interlude*)! Albeit they couldn't *speak with lips* but only in thoughts and with looks, Pedro put two questions into her *bruised eyes* (which allegedly *articulated*), that had plagued her for so long. (I remember hearing the first question somewhere from a jukebox sounding, but now that I am mourning at her bed edge, I will refrain from a kitschy quote.) The second question, of course, concerned their unresolved past: *Promise me you will write all of it!* Virginia demanded, and she urged his oath (taken *under duress* in the dreadful face of her destroyed vessel) to once reveal whole their shared story. Another work with an open ending, oddly called *Obsessed* – that's how Pedro will fulfill his promise and only on Mary's insistence. And so (or something like that, with my little epigonic contribution), even if too late to free the living Boy from Pandora's Box, they would at least ensure posthumous justice by proclaiming:

*"You BEGGED TO LIVE remembered as the gentle ragamuffin that you were. But you didn't admit to your Boyishness. YOU FEARED to become a Sapphic!"*



You were not just the mistress of discretion, but also the master of self-denial. You chastised yourself and let the others castigate you through their demands and poisoned gifts. You were suffocated in their social straightjacket and burned in your own Shirt of Nessus. But as far as your nature is concerned, *what shame is there in that? You were whole. Your fears and your ambivalence were you. Those who never touched these parts of you were close and intimate only with themselves. THEIR INSENSITIVITY to you, not these pens, desecrates your memory!"*

Oh dear, nobody wanted to read Mephisto's confessions! If... anyone had ever read it, there would be no darkroom for the nonsense that is still circulating to-day, covering up her decay's causes with humiliating legends for the palate of gullible folks – of an obscure breakdown out of the blue, causally due to her latest filming strain (which, on the contrary, ended with her dancing exuberantly as if she had come out of her dark hole for a hopeful moment) or postnatal depressions (from over a year ago). Did they have no ears to hark the mourning of a battered soul, ignored in life and mocked in death?! Virginia's true troubles – both her unresolved past and her gender doubts – WERE revealed in 1977! She was burned and drowned – first conditioned by humourless nuns to acquire a life-short conflict between longings and regret that she wouldn't be able to cope with, like so many suffering mates, and later numbed against the inner unrest by medical charlatanry so that she withered away like a seedling lacking the light – in unfulfilled passion! Her path to happiness was blocked by social obstacles rather than mental disorders – and unfortunately, above all, by her very own weak will. Virginia was, indeed, *the Prisoneress of herself* and of her circumstances (well, Pat's part has just crept in my pretty tirade).



Even worse, Pedro wasn't granted to complete his work (with the dusty drafts of the final third still waiting in a certain archive to be unearthed), banished by the grudge of those who refused to face what they had let to be done to a noble being who just WANTED TO LIVE her righteous self, gifted by nature, not by convention. To conceal their negligence and intolerance, their wilful entanglement in her spiderweb of pain, their share of her endless grief and horrible decline. But she starred willingly in their first-class play. She fulfilled all expectations; she performed a life-short Masquerade with a fake facade for futile folks. Phew! Love's Labour's Lost for Vanity Fair. A colourful *Dance of the Dead*.

Oh, all these slaves of convention who hold up their stain spangled banner of social demaanda and meaningless manners. Those vain Cavaliers! They would conceal their shame by ostracizing the Lady who was a Roundhead. By erasing her memory as if the lively Urchin had never lived – and therefore her noble vessel would be burned to ashes like the Protestant martyrs on Amersham Hill!

Remember how a certain common woman passed away unnoticed so many years ago with nothing left but an empty cot in a crowded ward, contrasting with the ballyhoo of a late *Pope*, a Princess or a King? Indeed, the real Virginia will fall in oblivion, just as she sinisterly predicted in *Hospital*, her both most cryptic and prophetic poem, when the greene girl (or an olde soul) was already thinking about the transience of everything earthly and the meaning of a dignified obituary – that she would be denied:

*I wonder who died in this bed tonight. Will she too be mourned by the world?*

The bed room! Tis always a suitable stage for a damsell in distress, to now imagine here another fully fictional scene from our little chamber play: You are resting (looking like *Antonia*, what else?) in the northwest wing of the Parsonage with a view straight ahead to the gate; and Wain Hill's calling through the barren branches on the left side. You locked yourself in the attic of the L-shaped section and possibly you emphasized like once your fellow Dick: *Leave me alone. I am not available!* Well to empathize after everyone had forced you to be happy. Now at the latest you are *The Woman Upstairs*.



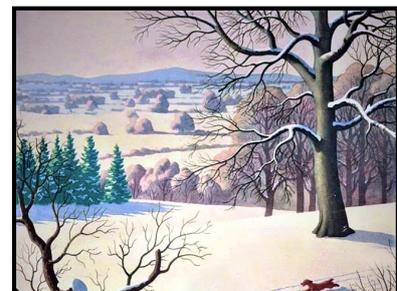


While swallowing your favourite toffees (I try to disregard the overflowing ashtray between your pillows), you softly turn the pages, sounding like the quiet rustle of damp leaves. In contrast, some huge hands are knocking on the door and some little fists are banging on the pain in a twinkling of two eyes due to a sudden clash with a large tome. That's to be called a decent flash(or book)back of your unwritten past, not true?! But there is always a bookshelf that women use to collide with when they fight for interpretative sovereignty. Then we listen confused rather than look (since the vision is blurry due to your thick cloud of smoke; perhaps your little rascal guessed that I couldn't resist from throwing in my leitmotif?) to a soundscape of clinking shackles that reminds of the *chain dance* in the *Beggar's Opera* (in Ben's version, of course), although probably just caused by lanterns shaken

by a salty breeze and imaginary waves clapping on some tidal shores. Seagulls sound like giggling kids in the distance, and the sonorous tone of the surf in a cave like a mourning boy inside. However, your eyes are now as blackened as your fluffy Panda's, once given as Forget-Me-Knot, who has accompanied you throughout your adulthood, day and night. And he too will be sitting at your bed edge until your last hour. Oh rootless daughter – you would have deserved a gentler companion, a mighty trunk to hold onto and strong arms for a hug, though less so loose hands for *bruised eyes*! Then you might switch the telly on to come up with other ideas, only to learn that Harry Corbett has just ceased his show with a touching last farewell for *Sooty, Sweap and Soo* (or *Sue*). OMG, that is a bad omen!



The 24th has come. Twas a rather busy morning. Silver met Virginia to grant her *a fortnight of pills* – so much for her questionable condition, contradicting his impression that she felt better. But above all, that's a well-considered dosage for a longer stay, prescribed by a local doctor who regular made house calls, so we may assume that she was just on the move. But look at the time for outdoor adventures: Virginia was known as such a sunny creature, seeking for summer, sand and sea (and anyway, there is nothing sadder than a wintry seaside resort!). So we have to wonder about her last hike through the bitter cold woods, completely contrary to her idea of a lively grove. Remember how she expressed poetically her climatic preferences in *April '58* (to immerse herself in Easter green) compared to *February '63*: Her disturbing poem was inspired by the Big Freeze that lasted 67 days with persistent snowfall from Boxing Day until March; it was a collective trauma and perhaps Virginia's personal one. Her skylights threatened to burst and fall down onto her mattress on the gallery (where she slept like under a summery star tent) and snow mounds blocked the doors, so that she was afraid of choking, starving or consuming the last ciggie. And reading her rhymes is physically painful, as we see her wandering with stiff limbs through the earthly veil of snow; and it cracks when her shanks are untied from the ground. So let me ask, which (or whose) message she received in recent days, if not even this morning, that led to her fatal decision, not to say panic, to flee to the Arctic? To forestall their chain reaction that was no longer under her control, as she lacked the strength for further treatments, be it social, mental or physical. And maybe she exclaimed: *Is there no escape from this madhouse?*



Then she *deposed a certain scrap on a bed* (just torn out of a book that was brand-new but looked already shabby by its intense use), inscribed with a cryptic little poem that ignorant folks will soon like to consider as THE proof of her *disturbed mind* albeit they won't recite it publicly – that will be their baddest omission and biggest success, by which Virginia is branded as a madwoman to this day.

In fact, this *hasty message of Love and Despair* was poetry, borrowed a bit from an older ode. Thommy, of course, would decipher the lines, respect her wishes and ask Pedro to their last farewell. Good man! But he certainly burned the book and all the unwritten past therein. All that remained would be to scatter their ashes. That's how she released them from her burden. Maid Sue would soon find the letter to first call Long John and trigger a long chain of Virginia's last ballyhoo, enduring until night with Rupert's bunch following her footprints (if not guided by smoke signs from the wilderness).



*A beautiful spot in the country:* Risboro Bay between the Whiteleaf and Wain Hill, protruding from the abyss.

It's now time to leave the abandoned cinema in which Virginia had endured it for so long and the sympathetic audience was urged to watch, whether sobbing or giggling but always with amazement, a couple of B-films in which she was the reluctant protagonist. Now she went on another drive into the sunset to the rampart of some wooded cliffs – but this time, no good fortune would prevent her from crossing the Rubicon.

As we learned, her farm lies on the shores of the Chilterns in a wide bay limited by sublime slopes; on the right is the Whiteleaf Cross, once carved by devotees of the olde religion, and Wain Hill lures from the sinister side with a stunning sundown like behind the Theban Peak where the Ol' Egyptians used to bury their deceased. The Upper Icknield Way connects the ridges and runs along her estate from the east unto the west; it is said to be haunted by a touching procession of ancient Celts slaughtered by the Romans and brave Roundheads massacred by the Cavaliers, who are mourning their early lost lives and seeking for justice and redemption – a bizarre place to stay for a receptive soul. When we ascend the escarpment we get a view of a never-ending vale that looks like a sea of no return. As it is well known, no one likes to cross this border northbound that leads from the pleasant Metroland into the bitter cold desert. And look what's worst of it: Hellsbury calls from the middle, undoubtedly Britain's most unlively town, with the brand-new Brutalist County Hall visible from miles and miles away,

like Stanley’s Monolith lying lost in space – and indeed, because it’s such an extremely rough place, some of his Droogs will be up to mischief there some years later. And some badmouthed clinics are scattered around the pitiful town like rocks in the sea to the doom of many vessels, such as the Rhone on her way to nowhere with passengers screaming in fear and driven to despair by a lousy crew.



The natives may forgive my nasty words in regard to their inhospitable habitat, but I am compelled to return again and again to understand what sinister truth is lurking behind those hospital walls. Let me briefly add my latest experiences in autumn ‘23: A rainstorm smacked my face as I crawled through abandoned fragments of Ol’Manderley. Then I left the register office to step into a monstrous pothole (if not even over dustbin lids) underneath the County Hall to get terrible backache (in fact, it turned out to be a severely pinched nerve, so that I could barely speak without moaning and would even need help to push the heavy luggage to return to my temporary Home) and remain bedridden for the rest of my trip, locked in my attic to look at clammy pages and out of rainy panes, perhaps a bit too long for my receptive mind (I’m sorry for a further of my meaningless digressions, but that’s what really happened during my search for clues on location). Anyway, after that I was done with Hellsbury Vale.



As she left the white gate for a very last time, we tend to assume that Rupert whined after his mistress. But perhaps he was sitting next to her (warmly wrapped up, of course, since unlike her, he shouldn’t be cold; and we might imagine him chewing on a tome), and so was Pedro Panda – as we will, indeed, find the latter also keeping vigil at her bedside during her last hours. Nevertheless, I doubt she knew that she had just taken a one-way ticket to the tomb. We literally know that Virginia felt freedom while walking and driving around (albeit she was allegedly the worst driver in the country, if we can believe the words of her Devonian instructor; but in memory of her winter trip through the Pinewood there may be a grain of truth in it) and used to flee from oppressive situations (if she didn’t petrify at any place) to clear her head outdoors instead of being immured. At this point, it’s worth to remember Wain Hall: Once it was custom for whole the flock of chickens to be chased up and down the avenue every single morning (or mourning) by grumpy old nuns (perhaps to keep them from questioning their imprisonment and the meaning of good and evil and foul and fair). But oddly enough, our faithful soul loved to be part of this cunning game and, by the way, she was a highly sportive person (at least in her prime). And so let me speculate that her true intention may have been to take another meditative path and rack her brains over how to cut her Gordian Knot, to force a decision for one or none (if not even get in touch with an obscure person) that she had delayed for too long. But then she wouldn’t find her way back through the Wilderness because she couldn’t see the forest for Too Many Christmas Trees.

Pretty Pitt, against it, would later conclude that she was eager *not to be found alive* (for good reasons, by the way, in regard to how she was urged to smile for everyone's joy while she felt like crying) and hurry to close his inquest with *suicide whilst balance of mind disturbed* – a verdict that everyone involved could live with and that miraculously freed them from any moral shame. That's how Virginia was pathologized as a long-suffering lunatic, based entirely on Silver's poisoned statements, which ignored the small amount of drugs that wasn't sufficiently lethal, and didn't even consider that, due to her narcoleptic tendency (and her questionable general condition), she might have simply collapsed as she lost herself in the woods. A remarkably quick conclusion in such an exceptional case, not true?! It might have needed a certain young Sergeant, *Barnaby* or how he was called back then, to solve the *Riddle of Rockhall* (incidentally, that's a nice title that I would recommend for another episode of *Midsomer Murders*). But please forgive my suggestive words and don't take me wrong: Uncovering the true circumstances of the strange case of the Obscure Lady who became the Greene Woman isn't a matter of investigation, but of moral integrity of the league of gentlemen who surely knew what drove her to escape from her Ordeal and that she embarked on her last journey with complete awareness.



The Upper Icknield Way, a narrowly bordered lane, leads straight up to Wain Hill. It's worth thinking about what if she had driven her car into the hedges again to leave the wreck with another bad bump? But *a day in the life* of '68 didn't follow the lucky plot of 1960. And who knows if she even took that route from the east unto the west through Midsomer County even if it seemed obvious? Given both her drive and hike, there seemed to be some sort of confusion, as if nobody knew the exact sequence of events. And without accusing anyone of negligence, I tend to assume that all of them involved may have thought (just like me) that she was on the move to a completely different place where one would rather expect *a lost lady* (in a dinghy with a maroon sail or whatever vehicle), namely *westward ho!*

Virginia would be found *just a mile from her home* short after ten p.m. after *having wandered through the woods up to ten hours*. The later statements about who called whom and when differ imprecisely, but the search began certainly *six hours after her departure* (respectively Silver's last farewell around midday). The concrete place where Virginia was shipwrecked would never be announced. And that's just as well; since obsessive scouts might be tempted to follow her tracks, carve their names into her tree and spread legends for the Cheddar cheesecake press. Oh dear – beware of those naughty folks!

At this point it's worth taking a little digression to the strange journey of another popular lady, in fact, not in fiction: A certain Dame Agatha had left her home for ominous reasons several decades earlier to be found (albeit happily alive) marooned halfway between Harrowgay and Ramsongate, or somewhere like that, after a big ballyhoo with whole an army involved on her tracks. As we know today, the blessing of the house was crooked (I apologize for this odd translation of a German saying); at that time, it was announced that she had been *temporarily disturbed*. Sounding familiar? It's the usual Victorian procedure! However, this is the plot of another unwritten play. The search for Virginia will be less excited, a quiet country affair much according to her shyness and discretion. So that at the end of the day there will be just two lonely constables who may have noticed her *maroon-coloured mini traveller* that was parked as if marooned *at the edge of the woods*. They will follow her footprints in the snow, with a dog or two, and one of them, an Ulster lad named Jack, will *give her artificial respiration about almost half an hour* until whole the bunch approaches to grant her injections and drag her to Manderley back – what a bitter (cold) irony: *The Reclining Lady was just having a rest*.



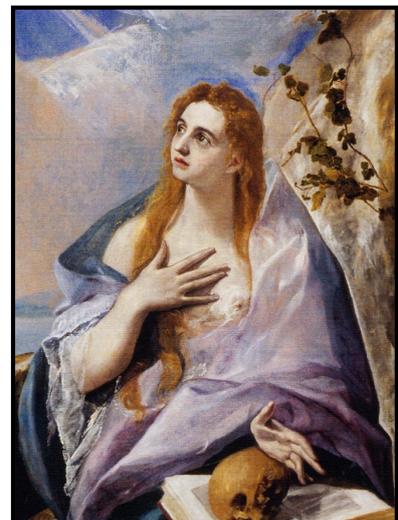
A remarkable aspect: Virginia's *DRIVE* to a beautiful spot in the country is always emphasized rather than her questionable hike. If she was lying in the cold without breathing whole the time, she could hardly have *shown signs of recovery* (as Jack would later state referring to his honest efforts) but she would have remained stiff like a frozen fish finger, at least in my imagination, albeit I am admittedly not a medical expert. But considering that *she was found just 700 feet from her car*, this contradicts the official assumption that she *had wandered for hours and hours* through the deep, deep woods. Therefore, it seems more obvious than negligent to conclude that her stay inside lasted much longer. She may have pondered about her dilemma before leaving her car; then she apparently walked (or slid) more or less directly to a certain place outdoors protected by a mighty tree, sat down on the roots and never rose again. From Virginia's point of view, her life had become a holistic failure, nothing but long-lived self-lies and losses in love.

Please forgive my tastelessness in the face of her tragedy to even recommend a suitable soundtrack by Purcell that might have been playing on her radio while she waited for *Godot* (or *Aeneas* to stay within the audio plot), namely the lament of *Dido*, a suffering Queen let down by her beloved, who had once washed up at her elegant feet: *When I am laid in earth...* As she was sitting in the dense haze from an ashtray with 16 ciggies in it, lit every quarter of an hour, it was the right time to remember *Tina* and *Evan* together (so long ago in the Golden Age) climbing a tree when they built their Raft of Love; and that fey girl exclaimed:



*We can do anything, Evan, anything, what we really want, if we accept the challenge!*  
 Now today the mature woman would certainly retort: "Oh what a fool I was to talk that naively! I had to learn the hard way that nothing in reality can fulfill the fondest dreams; that every, every goal achieved causes disillusionment. Creating anything real means it is stillborn from the start. As the poet Gryphius said (and I adore these wise olde Huns): *Es ist alles eitel – It is all in vain. What we build today / will be ruined tomorrow. A flowering seedling / must soon wither again.*

Coming to age means losing your youth;  
 to comply with adult's duty means renouncing children's games.  
 Fighting for happiness is pure waste of labour;  
 action makes one unfree; fulfillment exists only in thought.  
 Paradise cannot be found in real life, least of all in men to whom we sacrifice our bodies and souls and whose demaands we satisfy.  
 Those male companions we trust too naively always turn out to be scoundrels. Oh poor deceived women! We should abstain from heart-beating husbands and only hark to Mary's heart.  
 Our lifelong Odyssey, driven by fate and unfaithful fellows, can never find a secure haven; it is bound to lead to nowhere.  
 Carefree moments are merely *Interludes* of enduring grief;  
 and only bitterness remains. Fall follows summer;  
 then winter comes *and this I am* – at the mercy of transience.  
 But the whole of existence means *Les Preludes*  
 to that magnificent moment when we'll shake the Reaper's hand.  
 We will only find salvation from this earthly vale of tears if we faithfully hope for the time beyond."



We are now at the edge of a bucolic space (perhaps with a flock of sheep braving the cold and gulls circling above, or magpies like in Pedro's disturbing *Winter* poem) with a view to her Home, so close yet so far away, so we are tempted to turn around immediately; but I doubt that Virginia is enjoying the scenery or even looking back because her vision is blurry. *It's too late, too late to retreat!*

I know the place at the border of the woods where I used to have a rest when I wandered around the mound several times: a rather confusing junction where a handful of paths lead in different directions, all of them ending in gates, some open, some closed and some that could be slammed in your face. But first, you'll certainly take the curved lane along the slope, which passes by a wooden cottage clinging to the Cliffs protruding from the abyss, and overlooking the Sandy Bay with a Flat islet in the middle and abandoned quarantine barracks, and next to it an incredibly Steep rock lurking on the horizon.

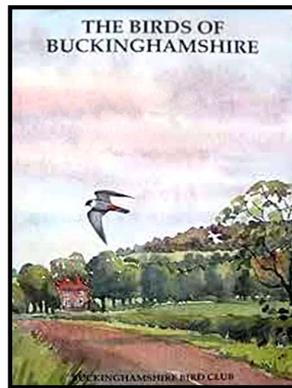
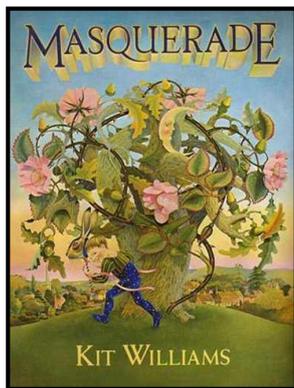


Your steps now lead straight to the entrance with its strangely magical attraction (perhaps from a beam of an Aladdin lamp fixed beside the door, shining dimly through the haze) and concurrent repulsion (something ominous is calling). "Beware, don't cross this border!" I would like to scream, but firstly, my tongue is tame, and secondly, if you were to change your mind, what would become of your obsessive fellow? He would simply vanish. So I'll let you go. You have to cope with the moment alone, look through a fogged up window, tap with your knuckles on the pane and seek for some who have pity on you, but there is no man, neither find you any to comfort ye. *The room is full of absence.* There is a table with a quirky still-life (like the messy remains on the *Interlude* set when the childish party was finally over). Somebody left *a bottle of whisky* on the one side and *a jar of sleeping pills* on the other; and in the middle lies a pair of pistols that were never used, but a single bullet is pointing at you. Worn curtains hang sadly down like convent gowns and a hidden jukebox plays quietly a tune from the Ronelles: *Do you still love me (tomorrow)?* And for a moment you catch a glimpse of an imaginary couple engrossed in a dance as if in slow-motion in a sinister barrel house. Then a bizarre experience follows: First you only notice a small gap, but suddenly the floorboards break completely to reveal a second floor beneath, pretty clean, almost virginal, with a fine layer of light dust and only a few spiderwebs hidden in the corners. Entangled in colourful sailcloth, a large tree trunk lies there, looking as if it had been washed up on the beach; and a mighty moth, pale as a ghost, has just hatched from it to fly away; and a second little one remains lying on the ground, still wriggling in its cocoon.

We recoiled in fear at the sight of the ghastly scene and hurried on to climb along the mound, but I think I remember that Virginia turned her head around for one last fleeting glance – she probably also perceived the red lanterns shaking in a breeze (only shadowy, as her eyes had just turned into pearls).



Whether she was seeking for her *Sweetheart Tree* in which her name had once been carved and that of her darling beside it, her forehead gently caressed by mossy twiggies, or stumbling along the steep slope, bruised by barren branches like a castigated nun, to pause at any trunk, who will ever know? But what we have heard (and here is Mary speaking) is that she *sat in silence for hours and hours* to be later *found like sleeping under a tree* (as the inquest reveals; and perhaps it was an ash as Pedro would hint), frozen by the breath of the awakened Cold Genius after she fell into a fatal trance due to a last reach into Long John's jar and a big sip from a bottle of rum (as Hugh will once, if more soberly, state). Last but not least, it's worth to think about what Pedro tells us many times about her peculiarity: When she was particularly stressed, Virginia tended to turn to stone, whether she was bedridden or even standing upright, while no longer perceiving her surroundings, neither the climate nor her closest. I think that's what happened, although it has been neglected in the public reception during her endless trance until today. And therefore her Enigma remains like Elgar's obscure allusions. But I hope the haze has cleared with the last sunrays shining through the branches and merry flakes dancing around as she lay under a bright blanket on her pillow of roots; and it is said that concurrently at a certain cape the sound of all water wheels froze for a moment of absolute silence, apart from the rustling of some leaves and a whisper in the air: *Adam a breeze!* Then she floated away on the Wings of the Seagull.



Oh, what a tragic fate of a lively lady who had set off from the warm climes of the Wide Sargasso Sea! Once expelled from paradise, always seeking for a secure haven, she drifted for so long in her ark of life through a sea of sobs – only to be found in the middle of nowhere, like the ancient shipwrecked on Dead Men's Chest, who were marooned halfway to their goal (or their gaol). Even worse, she was stranded at the edge of the Arctic Ocean, despised and rejected by all as a restless soul, desperately searching for lost time and love. But she may at least have been accompanied by a soothing melody:

*Come back to the Virgin Isles / he calls through the air.  
Come back to the Virgin Isles / your heart is still there.*



## Aftermath

Allow me to quote a dedication from a mysterious admirer, published a week after your demise, which refers to one of your magnificent recitals (and it sounds to me like another of Pedro's parables):

*I have never seen a complete stage presentation of The Seagull. However I did hear one once: It was an unforgettable performance of Virginia Maskell in Gielgud's radio presentation. This actress spanned perfectly the difficult bridge between the stage-struck girl of the first act and the disillusioned woman of the last act. Sa(i)d enough. Despite it, now comes my lament, forgive your wannabe bard:*



Do you remember the cheerful days when *Tina* built a cozy cottage on Marina Key, and how much she loved those lively lads with their big shovels? Indeed, that was your Catalyst to encourage Pedro to set up a tiny den (long after your Love Raft had already been wrecked). Could you have foreseen (or did you) that one day, even if not as the lucky lodge of the living lovers, it would serve him as his viewpoint on your shared past? Where he would write your epitaph on countless misty days, while raindrops were tapping on the pane (or the pain) as if by pale knuckles, after your noble vessel had turned into a white cloud so many years before, dissolving into a breathtaking sunset behind the *Reclining Lady*. This *Abelard* for the poor, who had preached desire for both red and white wine, which should always be drunk together – and now look at his ruins! For the rest of his life, there was nothing left for him but to stare sorrowfully into half an empty glass of oversalted water at the pitiful glow of an Aladdin lamp. And with the last ink of his pen (to have also pity on him), he wrote his confession of chauvinistic shame and injustice, done to the Princess of Suffering.

Once you laid in earth here the hollow stone with your lock of hair. This is your canopic jar in the little-known blessed place of *The Modern Heloise*.

Last but not least, I cannot help but ask another question that's been on my mind (and maybe yours too) for a while now, ever since I followed in your footsteps:

What became of Pedro Panda?



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