

Short Stories

Edward Arruns Mulhorn



The Bomb Target

We sat on the dunes at the end of the path, pulling off our shoes, hiding them in the grass. The beach was almost deserted; a few long bodies of adults lay guard over camps in the firm, dry sand, while children squatted in the furrowed shoreline – in the channels, the rock pools – with buckets and spades. Behind them, the receded sea lay bare vast sand-flats, sliding to a broad horizon, naked, changeless, shimmering, silver-flecked with shallow pools. Home to occasional blurred black dots: the pencil-marks of human shape, in search of stones and shells. There, too, in the muddled middle-distance, a skeleton of other years, proud yet bleeding in the sand, with barnacles to brace its legs, with rust to clothe its ribs.

There were six of us. We started slowly, tracing the haphazard paths dictated by a Frisbee, erring an inevitable course towards the bomb target. The sand was slime; it sucked the toes luxuriously with every step. Shells lay open, like hands to heaven, and sand eels ducked beneath our feet, as we laughed and lost our way towards the broken carcass, standing alone with its scratched thumbs skywards.

Billy gave me a piggy-back across a fast-flowing stream because I wasn't wearing shorts. By the time we were clear on the other side, he and I and Isabella were torn from the other three. I walked between them, whilst Izzy started telling us about how you catch flounders with your feet. You wade out into the estuary, then all you do is walk around till you feel one move beneath your toes. You dig down fast and catch its corners, or plunge a triton through the skin of the squirming beast and the sand above it. Then

you throw the fish in a frying pan. It seemed absurd, and so easy. Starting upon a hapless beast that wriggled beneath you, stranded in shallows, trapped by the force of your weight.

I looked up. Away to the left stood Lot's Wife, dejected: a tower of rock by the side of the cliff. That poor lonely woman, unknown and unnamed, turned to a pillar of salt.

Then Billy began to tell us how, a few years before, when they were all ten, he had gone for a walk with a group of friends, somewhere out by that point. They had been messing around, with no thought or direction, when they chanced on a patch of sinking sand. It was small and unmarked; it lay wanting and waiting. So they searched about for seaweed and stones, for drift and objects to feed its hunger – watching all gorged by the gradual throat, melted in the curious embrace of the close, consuming sands.

There was a girl with them – Billy couldn't remember her name – who stood by the side without joining in. She just stood there beside it, transfixed. Watching it, watching it from the edge; staring into its heart. Then, as Billy turned to hurl a rock into that pool of nothingness, he saw that the girl was standing in it – she was in it up to her knees.

There was panic then, and nobody knew what to do. Someone ran off to get help from the shore, while others reached out for her hands. She didn't sink quickly, but she was wearing boots that wouldn't come off, and her feet just wouldn't come out. She was standing listless as they yanked at her arms, seemingly sapped of her strength. She didn't speak, nor seem to struggle, and yet there were tears in her eyes. Then, when swallowed by the sand to her waist, the

coastguard appeared with a group of men and they dragged her out with a rope.

We were nearing the bomb target. It was made of ten great hunks of timber, crossed with a rusting iron ribcage. It rose as forlorn as a copse in winter, blind to its long-forgotten splendor. Dissolving through the course of time as the sea's motion bore it down.

Someone threw the Frisbee at me. I didn't see it till too late, and it sailed right over my head. It glided into the shadow of a pool beneath the exhausted frame.

I turned and ran – over the sand, over a few green, slimy stones at the foot of the nearest post – into the cold, salty pool.

It was dark inside. I stood for a moment in sightlessness. The wind had all dissolved. I saw the target in the scree of water, cast proud and huge, looming above the reflected sky which hid behind it. I feared I would scrape my feet on its bones.

Outside they were calling me; they were pointing through the sunlight to the fallen Frisbee, the wind doing battle with their hair. I waded over and stretched through the darkness. As I did so I saw the face of a child – a young child – white, with tears in her eyes, with slow tears spoiling her expressionless face. Her lips were moving, I could hear her speaking: ever so softly saying, repeating, 'don't leave me here, alone!'

The Compleat Angler

Bass. Bass whispers Snead, in the hunched, yellow home-glow of the pub. Bass, he hisses, his breath on Phelps' ear, his words thick in the close, drugged air. A bass conspiracy.

Yet Phelps is unconvinced. He has only known till now the pleasure of feeling sea-salt in his face, the throb of the engine, the roll of the boat, the six-hook lines which trawl the coasts for shoals of mackerel. He has only lived till now for cloudy dusk and misty daybreak, standing on the silvered bank whilst casting a continuous fly at salmon which would trek upstream. He has only cared till now to split the surface sheen of lochs with oar and bow, guiding a creaking wooden hull to haunts of midnight trout. Phelps has never gone for bass.

Bass, says Snead, caressing the sound, bass is a beast you catch by guile. Bass is the fisherman's dream.

To Phelps the dream would seem a nightmare. Forced to sit in a bobbing boat in the narrow waters of an estuary – shallow, unblown, unmoving, alone – with nothing to do but watch a line you never trim or reel back in, hoping a fish is foolish enough to take a spontaneous swipe. Where is the skill or adventure in that?

That, says Snead, is precisely it. He bends his long body towards the fire, dragging fat fingers through his beard. The single way to catch the beast is to be more boring than the bass.

The following morning, with little haste, Phelps walks down the sea-slick jetty, to take to the estuary in Snead's boat. The seven o'clock sun is bright and distant; the air is cold, and

the water too, as Phelps eases the boat from its idle mooring, and drifts with it down the salt-water river, gliding noiselessly from the shore. Phelps takes the oars and makes for the channel, maneuvering around the dormant berths of other vessels. The breeze is slight, the shoreline grey, deserted. The fields are shadowed with a film of mist as he takes the sun upon his back and ventures to the sea.

Rounding the final curve in the river the wind picks up; waves crease over the bar, spitting their spume in his hair. Phelps makes for the sheltering cliff on the farther side of the river's mouth, guiding the boat with heavier strokes close to the mottled crags. Here he slackens off, catching sight of the sandy floor and the dancing shadow of his hull upon it, drowned some fifteen feet below, broken by the motion of the sun-smitten sea.

The anchor splits the water. Phelps sits, drawing in the oars, busy with his tackle as the drunken bed stares at him buoyantly.

The giddy surface breaks for an instant to take the bait. Phelps steadies his weight in the boat, catches the gut in the spool, cranes his neck inchily over the side, cautiously searching the liquid world to gauge the depth of his line.

Anchored in the centre of the boat, the boat to the bed, the bait to the brilliant hook, Phelps never moves, he scarcely breathes. Only the regular pound of his heart, the trespass of interest caught in his eye, the uneasy twitch of a sinewy finger, would indicate Phelps is awake.

Awake?! cries Phelps, having bobbed on the sea till eight in the evening, having rushed empty-handed to find out Sned. Awake?! It was totally awesome!

Snead's boat sees service for a second day, as Phelps descends on the creased shoreline, and shunts the bark out into the sea. The shapeless hills are hung with the eery enchantment of dawn. A light steady rain is shaken unseen from the measureless depth of the skies. A piercing breeze pinches the coast, hurrying pockets of mist. Phelps whistles as he pulls at the oars, rounding the point to the sea.

The anchor stamps the water. Phelps claps his hands at the cold, licks the rain from his beard, braces himself in the slow-sighing boat, and sits.

The morning darkens. A fine film of fog draws in from the sea, closing around the motionless man, hugging him close to the cliff. Somewhere in time Phelps stands, repositions the boat, bites at a biscuit, a brown-bread sandwich, and renews the bait on his hook.

It is by the lanterns on the boathouse that Phelps steers himself safely back to the shore. The wind whips round him as he secures his mooring, as he cautiously finds his feet on the quay.

Snead. Snead in the shadow of fading embers, hunched in a stained yellow nook of the pub, trawling plump fingers through his wind-shocked beard, uncomfortably drinking alone. For the last two days Snead has felt the salt in his face, the throb of the engine, the roll of the boat, and the six-hook lines spun from the back of a fishing smack as he's trawled for mackerel in the open sea. The boat he has borrowed has been alive with convulsing shapes, slapping their heads and tails on the deck, dancing contortions till glue-eyed death. Just once or twice has he raised his eyes, has he dared to look at his own proud vessel, cradled by the

cliff, captained by Phelps, in static pursuit of the unseen bass.

Wild and wet as the third day breaks, Phelps is on the sea before the grey surging mass meets dawn. The cliff the colour of fury, black breakers slapping against its scalp, Phelps rides out the day, with a line laid into the restless water, in the rage of the estuary.

As dusk rolls in, the day regains its poise and smiles along the coast, caressing the sea to rest. On the cliff, Snead looks down at the hungry man in the idle boat, drifting on his own dark purpose, in the narrow waters of the estuary – alone, unmoving – just watching his line.

Snead discovers from Phelps' wife how bad the affliction is. He is gone in the morning before she awakens, and returns wet and hungry and ready for bed. In sleep he mutters about fish. She tells Snead that she wouldn't mind, if only Phelps were to bring one back home. But she has never seen a bass, and now she thinks she never will. Tomorrow they have to leave. And what will happen, she asks of Snead, if he hasn't caught one by then? Will he continue the way that he has, talking and dreaming and living the fish, with no other thought in his mind? Will he reject the world around him – his wife, his kids, his job, his home – and stay here till he catches a bass? How can he be so desperately boring, sitting there day after day on his own, watching the line without every moving, hoping a fish is foolish enough to take a spontaneous swipe?

Snead. Snead in the pub, when in walks Phelps. Phelps who has been at sea all day. All day and still no bass. No bass, but perhaps one last attempt. Attempting a smile, Snead cradles his beer in both his hands. His hands steer meaning

back to Phelps. Phelps, take my boat, and with it take me!
Is there not room for two?

Not room for two. Mrs Phelps endures a minute account of the day, serves supper, goes to bed, dreams of other things than bass, wakes up without Phelps, phones Snead to discover from Mrs Snead that Snead is hiding on the cliff watching Phelps who in turn is watching his line, has lunch, does the packing, cooks supper, cleans the house, lies on the sofa with a foot in the air – reading magazines – waiting for Phelps.

Phelps comes home, but late, and alone. His supper and his side of the bed are cold.

Daybreak. Snead casts a curious eye over the jetty. His boat is there on its mooring. Then Phelps has gone. Gone has Phelps. Phelps. Gone.

Over a passive sea a gull floats, wings akimbo, crying. Patches of cloud glide over the fields; the broad estuary curls, curvaceous, pregnant, out towards the sea. The brown-red, ponderous cliff glows like a welcoming fire.

Squinting through the glare of the morning, Snead finds himself unusually nervous as he walks to his boat to fish for bass.

The Calm

Mrs Pengelly stood by the kitchen window.

Through the stale lower panes glazed with grease, stained with the freckles of cindered paper and the husks of tealeaves spat from the pot, the sea strained its skin to the far horizon, blending and losing itself in the sky, in an ocean of motionless blue. Beyond the wall of the unkempt garden the ground fell steeply away, tangled and knotted with thigh-deep grass. More distant still, the sighing pools of green dissolved into the fierce deformity of cliff and crag, hunched and haggard, clutched around the sandy fringe of a bay. Tapered fingers of fallen rock clawed at the plateau of the beach, and were swallowed in a hungry sea. To their right, a semi-symmetrical harbour, a neat enclosure, a welcome shelter, carved from the cliff in a curious crescent, fused at its tail with a bony breakwater stretching into the waves. Within its walls, a half-dozen vessels huddled together, scraping their keels on the sand. On the quay a clutter of rusting chains, of oil-cans, buoys and lobster pots. Of tenders, oars, and pallets strung to each other and stored for the winter. Facing them, over the line of a lane, a bright bunched vein of low thatched cottage, mute and white, pressed cheek to cheek, crouched in the elbow of the cliff.

Mrs Pengelly sat on a chair by the long kitchen table.

On the sideboard, just beyond her reach, a half-bowl of ripened fruit was blemished with petals fallen from flowers in a vase. A fly repeated tapped at the window, breaking the beams of the dust-spilt sunlight straining its gaze from the yard. The larder door stood open, waiting. The plastic of an

unglazed window tensed in the unfelt breeze. A tarnished teapot cold before her; a half-drained mug of tea. From the cracks of the discoloured ceiling, flakes of paint lay trapped in cobwebs, shivering to the spider's touch. On the table, here before her, an opened book with faded covers, placed face-down, as yet unread. A pile of sealed envelopes collapsed against a stack of papers. Magazines as yet unwrapped. A phone run out of charge. Spoiled photographs with faces fierce with phantom life and laughter, strewn and scattered on the floor, still smiling up at her.

Mrs Pengelly lay on a clothes-spilt sofa at the darkened end of the living room.

She could hear the plastic larder window sucking at the searching wind; the sound of the tap which dripped out time and trickled away in the sink. She could trace the random path of the fly, pressing its body against the windows, striving to meet with the day. She could feel the film of the photographs, creased with the curves of frequent touch, bleached in the eye of the sun. She could taste the dust which hung in the air; she could smell the wasted fruit in its bowl, its sweet flesh splayed from its stone. She could sense the close room closing around her, stealing her, sealing her into its walls. And beyond it she could sense the sea, the endless roll of the merciful waves, murmuring longing, mixed with desire. So comforting, so safe, and so sure.

Mrs Pengelly stood in the hall, in the very heart of the house. Oilskins hugged the wall like scarecrows, hanged on pegs, with aching arms.

Mrs Pengelly stood, unthinking.

Mrs Pengelly stood, unknowing.

Mrs Pengelly smiled

When I Was Young

She never thought that she was beautiful. She didn't think on it at all.

'O, what a darling child!' 'What a lovely little girl!' Her cheek was pinched, her hand was pressed, her shoulders squeezed, her body lifted up in strong hands locked around her waist. This was part of the nuisance of living, and she never thought it more. Sometimes she obliged in obedient silence, sometimes she engaged with raucous laughter, sometimes she shied away. She didn't care for what they did, nor what it was they had to say. Not often did she care. And then, when she was old enough, she learned to run away.

'Stop it!' 'Get off!' 'Don't touch me!' She was one of the boys, and did as boys must do. To her mother's despair she fought at school, in the playground and in class. She fought at home. She learned to slam, and swear, and slate. To break things, take things, hide things somewhere no one thought to look. She even learned to spit. 'Everyone spits and swears at school!' 'It's not fair to lock me in my room!' 'O! How I hate you all!'

She was caught cheating in exams. 'You mustn't ever do that again! You're a lovely little girl, and so pretty. Pretty little girls shouldn't do such things.' Then only ugly people were allowed to cheat. She envied Angela for that. Angela was so ugly. Everyone knew it, they told her so. They ganged up on her, despised her, mocked her because she was so ugly. But how lucky she was too! Being able to cheat in exams! She envied Angela's broken glasses; she envied

her crooked nose; she envied her chin which went on forever; she envied her red buckled shoes.

One night she stole the kitchen scissors. She went to the bathroom and chopped off her hair. All she could grasp on the back of her head, all that cascaded over her cheeks, till her ears and her neck were bare. Now I have hair like Angela's hair; now I am able to cheat in class. But she found out it wasn't so. Then what was the point of being ugly? Why did people decide to be ugly if there wasn't something in it for them?

And worse still, even after her punishment, even after the bribes and coercion – the 'don't you ever do that again!' – her mother's friends still said of her, 'O, what a beautiful girl!'

She ran to her room and looked in the mirror. Why aren't I ugly now? Why don't they mock me for having short hair? She pushed her face up close to the glass, inspecting all she could see. Her hair was much like Angela's, and her chin was almost as long. When she felt with her finger along her nose she knew that it wasn't straight. Perhaps wearing glasses made people ugly. That's what she needed to do.

She crept downstairs in the small of the night, searching for sunglasses in the drawer in the hall. Here were some pairs that belonged to her father. She took the ugliest ones. At school next day she hid in the toilet, and splintered the lenses against the bowl. Now she'd have proof of her ugliness; now she would joy in their scorn. She balanced the empty rims on her nose and went back into her class.

'Where did you get those?' her teacher demanded.

'I need to wear them' she replied.

'Don't be stupid, girl! There aren't any lenses in them.'

'Yes, there are.'

'Go into the corner this minute! I can't abide foolish children!'

She sat in the corner, alone, triumphant. Now they must hate me, now they will mock, because now I am ugly like Angela. Though when the bell for break-time sounded, when she ran out onto the tarmac, when she put on the glasses once more, nobody came to hit her or spit at her, nobody laughed at or called her names.

'Simon! Simon!' she shouted, tugging at the sleeve of a body swinging from the bright yellow bars of the climbing frame.

'Simon, am I ugly?'

'I don't know.'

'Tell me! Am I ugly? I want to know!'

'All girls are ugly!' he replied. But she knew he was just saying that.

'Then why don't you say something nasty to me?'

'Leave me alone! I want to swing!'

So she left him alone and went to another. She asked the same of him –

'James! Hit me, James! I'm ugly! Please hit me!'

'If I do, will you hit me back?'

'It depends how hard you hit me.'

'How hard do you want me to hit you?'

'I don't mind... But not too hard. If you hit me too hard I'll hit you back.'

‘Then I won’t. You hit people far too hard. I don’t like it when you hit me.’

‘I promise I won’t.’

‘No, I don’t believe you’ cried James, and ran away towards the teacher.

Later, at home, she sat in the lounge and stared at the fire, vexed by a knowledge she couldn’t acquire. Why didn’t James hit me in the playground? He didn’t hit me because he knew if he hurt me I would hit him back. I hit people, but Angela doesn’t. Angela’s ugly because she’s weak. Then I must be pretty because I’m strong.

‘Daddy, why am I strong?’ she swiveled round and asked instinctively.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Why am I strong?’ she moaned impatiently.

‘Because you fight too much. I thought your mother told you to stop fighting.’

‘Yes, but if I stop fighting then I’ll get all ugly.’

‘What?!’

‘If I don’t fight my chin will get longer, and I’ll have to start wearing glasses, and...’

‘Rubbish! Who on earth told you that?!’

‘Angela doesn’t fight, and she’s disgusting.’

‘That’s got nothing to do with it! Being strong doesn’t make you attractive. Slight, slender women are often thought beautiful. Look at your mother...’

‘Yuk! She’s old and all wrinkled!’

‘She’s still beautiful. The older she grows the more gorgeous she gets...’

‘O, Dad! When she’s as old as Granny she’ll be quite revolting!’

‘Not to me she won’t. You’ll find the same yourself. Your attitude will change. You’ll see’, he concluded enigmatically.

Not for the first time in her life she left the room unsatisfied, appalled at her father’s lack of perception, stunned by his ignorance.



If there was one thing more irritating than being called ‘a beautiful girl’ it was being called ‘a beautiful woman’. Yet she felt herself changing, developing. She would look in the mirror with intrigue and foreboding, wondering how all these changes were happening while she in herself stayed the same. Yes, Angela was bloody ugly. She’d need a beard to disguise that chin. Though even then she would still be ugly. What made Angela so unattractive? And why, by contrast, was she thought pretty – without even having to try?

The attitudes around her altered. She walked down the street and could sense herself watched. She could feel the scrutiny of men. And then, the race to open doors for her; the eyes, the smiles, the innuendos; the invitations, gifts, false laughter; the awkward silence, the skin-deep banter; pressing ever closer, closer; harmless, hurtful words and gestures; fingers, hands, and lips, and shoulders. She hated all of it.

At sixteen she recoiled at the thought of eighteen. At eighteen she didn’t dare to think of what life would be like at twenty one. At twenty one she knew that thirty was still a

lifetime away. Yet all too soon, on her thirtieth birthday, she still thought herself to be young.

Angela had been blessed with contact lenses. Her nose had settled comfortably in the square of her face and seemed to become here. Even her chin was less pronounced, as though it had been chiseled away. It must have been. Certainly Angela's boyfriend thought so, or he wouldn't have proposed to her. And then he went on to marry her – so it clearly wasn't a joke. And not long after they had their first child. Then, soon after, she was pregnant again. All whilst Angela's old school friend marched on alone, on her own, carrying her beauty forever before her, like a banner, a headline, a shield.

And then, almost before she knew it – as though it had crept up behind her in secret, as though she first felt it when breathed on her neck – she had reached the age of thirty five.

Then, when next she looked, she was forty.

She was godmother to Angela's third child. She went to the christening, and found that the men were not all looking at her. Their eyes were elsewhere, not always upon her. Their gaze would wander around the room. Well, there were girls of twenty one here. Young, fickle things; barely women as yet.

After the christening she went home.

'Hello, my beautiful!' said her father, greeting her with his open arms.

She submitted herself to his rapture in silence, as though his welcome a slight. He calls me his, the one he finds

beautiful, not the one who is known to be beautiful – not as once, as it was before. She, more beautiful than them all.

So she stopped in the mirror, she looked in the mirror, ever and often inspecting its gaze. She looked and she saw and she said to herself – I'm forty now, yet my skin is so soft, and my eyes are sparkling and clear. Hardly a blemish, hardly a wrinkle spoils my beautiful face. Angela may be tired and worn, but I am beautiful, still I'm beautiful. I am the beautiful one.

Carey

Behind the house a narrow track led out towards a hill. Used only in the autumn, when the planters came to fell, it was tangled with bracken and brambles the summer long. But all summer long, all through the year, a furtive path of naked feet was patted out in the grass. It danced through the scrub, it skipped round a pond, it bounded down an urgent slope, until it came to a tree.

Here the planters never came. Here, sheltered in the curve of the hill, the tree stretched out, immeasurable, in a perpetual, contented yawn. Its vast trunk bound round an ancient boulder, covered with sheer green, spongy moss, like a carpet, a short-cropped fleece. Standing on the primal stone you could stretch out your arms and hug the trunk, and the tree would shiver in pure delight, right to its fingers ends. It would whisper to you as you wrapped around it, and from the knit-work of shielding branches it would look down and wink at you.

Beneath its shoulders the air was cool; the ground swirled and shifted, in differing depths, like a giddy, wind-whipped, unlevel sea. Only the stones were safe.

Outside, in the ticking heat, the bleached grass swayed like rhythmic seaweed, fiercely bright and alive. The fine sky petered into the distance, dissolving, lost on the wind. An occasional fleck marked the line of a bird, high, in slow motion, curling loose circles, scarcely flapping its wings.

And here, straight above me, through the infinite boughs that shot out like bridges, like elephants' trunks, like giants' fingers – clung to the air in the chattering canopy –

swinging on sheaves of gossiping leaves, high in the treetop,
here sat Carey.

Beautiful Carey.



At the foot of furious, featureless mountains – shapeless,
colourless, fused at the hip, mute with pain and hunched in
conspiracy – a girdle of shingle cradled the sea. The waters
purple and dull, swum with the vast, blind agony of
reflected peaks, rolling harsh breakers which spat at the
land, spiteful, tormented, possessed.

Beyond the cruel bay, a steel grey sea, stroking a restless,
angry dance to a mirror of homage, a rhythmical roll, the
further it filtered from sight. There dots of seagulls
swooped and fed, screaming at a fishing smack heavy with
its catch.

Wading out from the beach, trousers rolled to the knee,
through the sheer empty sea, you could thrust your hands
through its liquid skin and drive them up through the
spume-soaked air till the lifeless water was cupped between
your half-numb fingers and thumbs. There, captured, it was
clear and cool. You could throw it upwards at the skies, and
see – for a fraction of time – its crystal fracturing, firing
with life, then falling, spent like a weary firework, back to
the indistinguishable grey.

Cup after cup of freezing water forced towards the
fathomless skies, charged with vibrancy and with light,
cascading tumultuous effervescence, melting, exhausted,
into the sea.

And here, framed in the frantic liquid rainbow, buoyed by the murmuring, pregnant waves, stretched on her back and looking skywards, floating far on the sun-void seas, here lay Carey.

Beautiful Carey.



A sheep field sloping behind the house, beyond skeletal, rusting tin-roofed barns engulfed in nettles and weed. Past dry stone walls and a wooden pen, wind-bruised and broken down. An encroaching copse; a cluster of bracken; a tumble-down circle of stones.

A still summer evening; and at dusk you could mount the gentle slope till you came to a single oak. Sheep scattered as you sought broken boughs, and took a spade to the turf.

As darkness settled, shrouding you, sealing you tight in its grasp, smudging out identity, you could light a fire and its sudden flames would stir the night's tranquility. Faces flushed, intrigued by the blaze, mindless of the blanket of blackness hung around us in folds.

After the early explosion of light the flames expired, and in their wake entrancing embers glowed. Quiet, relentless energy, creating a catastrophe of death and life. Shapes and fables rose incensed amongst the shattered brands. The hero slain; the throne regained; the fool who died of the cold, cold heart he could not come to own – not even here, in the very core, where passions are wrought and brought low. Here the caverns of hell; the well where seven maidens sleep beside their pots of gold. The endless falling through tiers of being; and he who would fly and touch the sun.

And here, deep in the heart of the fire, through the fire – beyond the ashes, the crumbling cinder – those eyes, those fixed eyes kindling heat, burning with life and stoking the flame, those furnace eyes of Carey.

Beautiful Carey.



The room soundless. Walking as if on dust towards the bed. Mute. A splinter of sharp, ugly light slicing into the silent room through a gap between curtain and wall. The windows closed, and the air dull. Dull and warm, this grey, grey room. Colourless, noiseless, trapped in time. Resistant to the force of life. Resistant.

The beat of the blood which pulses through me throbs like a drum in my ears. Here, now, the brilliant day has melted in eternal grey. Here, now, the whispering world has cut out its tongue, and is dumb.

Here. Now.

I cannot comprehend the strength of your being, of your life. Not even here in the dull, grey room: shadowed, eclipsed, and void of life. Even here, even now, with what you are, with what you have become. Your nothingness is so much more than all and everything of me. Your lifelessness is charged with self. You are, as I can never be.

These are my words, my thoughts. They are all that I own, yet they fall so short of meaning. Is there no other being? Is there life without life? You, who were all life. All that remains.

Beautiful Carey.

Time

- What is a minute?
- A minute is sixty seconds.
- What is a second?
- It depends. A second is ‘one monkey’. When you are older and you can say ‘monkey’ quickly, a second is more like ‘one elephant’.
- So seconds get bigger?
- No, seconds stay the same. You get bigger. Seconds aren’t big or small. Seconds are long.
- How long?
- About *that* long.
- That’s not long.
- No. But when you put them together they are long.
- How long?
- Very long, if you have enough of them.
- How many seconds are enough?
- Enough for what?
- Enough to be long.
- Well, that depends. Sixty seconds is a minute, and sixty minutes is an hour. And an hour can be a long time. An hour is sitting in the car and driving for fifty miles...
- That’s long. That’s ever so long...
- Or watching ten cartoons, or...
- That’s not long. Hey! That’s not long!
- Yes, it is. It’s still an hour.
- But it’s not a long hour.
- Well it might not seem as long, but it is as long. It’s still sixty minutes.
- I think car hours are long and cartoon hours are short.

- That’s because time goes faster when you are enjoying yourself.
- That’s not fair! I wish all time was the same.
- It is the same.
- But you said it goes faster when you’re having fun.
- It seems to go faster, but actually it goes just the same.
- That doesn’t make sense, if sometimes it goes faster and sometimes slower, but really it’s all just the same.
- That’s just the way it is.
- O! ... Why do we have time?
- So we can tell the beginning from the end, and how long there is in between. It helps us to plan things. When to get up, when to have lunch, and when to go to bed. It lets me know old you are.
- But you know how old I am. You don’t need time!
- Yes, we do. Time also tells days and weeks and months and years. Without time we wouldn’t know what year it was, and if we didn’t know what year it was we wouldn’t know how old you are.
- You could guess...
- Yes, we could guess, but we wouldn’t know.
- And you could tell what month it was by what the weather was like, and if there were leaves on the trees, and that sort of thing.
- Yes, we could, but we wouldn’t know.
- And what time of day it was by if it was light or dark, or where the sun was in the sky.
- Maybe.
- And lunchtime would be when you got hungry.
- That’s true. But we still wouldn’t know for sure.
- But why would we want to know?
- Because we want to know accurately. Both when things are, and how long they take.

– Why do we want to know, when some things take a long time and some things don't?

– Well, just imagine what life without time would be like. Friends wouldn't know when to come to play. We wouldn't know when to go on holiday. I wouldn't know when to give you your pocket money. Just imagine that! ...

– So what did we do before time began?

– I'm sorry?

– What did people do before time started?

– Time didn't start. It's always been here. Only we haven't always measured it.

– What did we do before then?

– I guess we used to do what you want to do now. It's quite likely that we've always been aware of the concept of time, but we just haven't always had a way to measure it. We grow up knowing that when things come to an end they go into the past. And we also know other things will happen at a certain point in the future, even though we don't know what they are. Time goes in a line that way, but it goes round and round as well. There is day and then night, and that night is followed by another day. Even the earliest people worked that out for themselves. They knew that when leaves fell off the trees the spring would return in a while. They knew that the natural cycle repeats. They probably ate when they were hungry, and had a bath when it all got a bit too smelly for comfort. So I suppose they had their own way of time-keeping, even before someone came up with the bright idea of dividing it into seconds and minutes and months and years.

– How can seconds and stuff just be an idea?

– Well, because that's all they really are. They're just things that we've invented to help us make sense of time. They're not actually time itself. If we decided to do away with

minutes and talked about sixty frankfurters in an hour it wouldn't make any difference to time. If we decided to have a hundred minutes in an hour, or in fact if we decided to do away with minutes altogether, time would be just the same, and continue in just the same way. It's only the way we measure time that would change.

– So time's been around forever?

– Yup.

– And when does time stop?

– Never.

– Not even when you die?

– It won't stop for other people, even if it might for you.

– So it goes on forever?

– Yup, it goes on for eternity. In fact, eternity is what we say when we talk about time going on forever.

– And how far through eternity are we now?

– Who knows? Time has no beginning and no ending, so we can't even be somewhere in the middle. We're just sort of here. In a fraction of eternity.

– O.

– In fact, if you think about it, we're always here, because it's always now. Only this now isn't the same as that now...

– Which now?

– The now that happened a couple of frankfurters ago.

– Dad?

– Yes, Jessie.

– How long is this now going to last?

– Which now?

– That now.

– I'm not sure. It would be nice to think that if we waited here for long enough it might come round again, and then we could measure it.

– Dad?

– Yes, Jessie.

– I hope the next now’s going to last a bit longer. Do you think it will?

– Who knows? It might just last forever...

Space

- How big is big?
- It depends. You can't really say.
- Well, when does something stop being small and start being big?
- When it's bigger than average.
- What's average?
- Average is right in the middle. Not small nor big, but slap bang between.
- Like what?
- Like some of the children in your class are five, and a few of them are seven, but most of them are six. So the average age is probably around that. If you are more than six you are older than average, and if you are less than six you are younger than average. But if you're round about six then that's average. It's kind of in the middle.
- Jack's almost seven but he's much smaller than me.
- That's because being older isn't the same as being bigger. But whenever we're comparing like for like, whether big and small, or tall and short, or light and dark, the average is right in the middle.
- Right in the middle?
- Yes.
- Is average good?
- Well, average is average.
- But is it good to be average?
- Sometimes.
- You're not being very helpful...
- Well it's hard to say. Being average height is quite useful. You can reach up to things on a shelf, and get through a

door without having to bend. But if you're average at everything then maybe it gets a bit boring.

– Am I average, Dad?

– No, Jessie, you're certainly not.

– What am I then?

– You're... you're who you are. Average is just a statement of fact.

– And anything bigger than average is big?

– Well, it's bigger than average yes.

– So it's big?

– Well, you wouldn't call it small.

– Then it's big?

– Relatively, yes.

– Big?

– When comparing two things that are otherwise the same.

– Two things that are the same?

– Yes.

– But if they're the same then how can you compare them?!

– You can compare anything. But it's still relative. I mean, a big mountain is a lot bigger than a big banana. But a really big banana is still a lot smaller than a mountain which is only quite big.

– O...

– Which is why I said you can't really say how big big is.

– What's the biggest thing in the world?

– Well, the world itself is very big. It's huge. There again, it's very small when compared to something like the sun.

– Is the sun the biggest thing in the world then?

– The sun isn't in the world. The sun is a star, and the world is a planet that we call the earth, which goes round and round the sun. The sun is the biggest thing in the solar system. The solar system is the name we give to all the planets that move round the sun.

- So the sun is the biggest thing there is?
- Well, in fact the sun is just one star amongst millions and millions of stars that are all grouped together in something we call our galaxy. And some of the stars in our galaxy are much bigger than the sun. In fact, there are other galaxies that are bigger than our own...
- So what's the biggest thing?
- In space?
- What's space?
- Space is kind of everything. And it's kind of nothing too.
- What?
- I mean, I don't know. I don't know anyone who knows for sure. Space is infinite. That means it just goes on and on forever. Which means we'll never know for sure what the biggest thing is.
- How can it just go on forever?
- Because nobody's found where it ends. Nobody even knows if there is an end.
- Then infinity is the biggest thing that there is!
- Well, it's difficult to say it's the biggest thing. Infinity is an idea rather than being a thing. You can't see it and you can't measure it.
- Then how do you know it's there?
- Because it's a concept.
- A what?
- An idea.
- A very big idea.
- Yes.
- The biggest.
- If you like.
- The biggest in the whole... in the whole of infinity!
- Well, yes and no. Because it's also the smallest.
- The smallest?

- Yes.
- What do you mean?
- Remember our big banana?
- Yes.
- What happens if we chop it in half? What have we got?
- Is this a trick question, Dad?
- No.
- We’ve got half a banana.
- That’s right. Chop the half in half again. What have we got now?
- Half a half.
- A quarter, yes.
- So let’s keep on chopping one bit of it, and chopping it and chopping it. How long can we keep on chopping it for?
- Until it disappears?
- How can it disappear? Things don’t just disappear. You’re not a magician, are you?
- But I won’t be able to see it any more.
- Ah, that’s different from it disappearing. Get a magnifying glass and then you’ll see it again.
- The knife’s too big.
- Get a smaller knife.
- There isn’t a smaller knife!
- But if there was one, you would be able to keep on chopping it, wouldn’t you? And when you can’t see it under a magnifying glass any more, you can still see it under a microscope, so you can keep on chopping and chopping. In fact, because things don’t just disappear, you could keep on chopping it forever. You could chop it for infinity.
- But who would want to eat it?
- What?!
- Who would want to eat a banana if it got that small?

– The banana’s just an example. Nobody’s going to eat it. We could take anything you like. Think of numbers. You can always add one onto a number, and you can always halve a number too. No matter how big that number is. No matter how small. And you can do it again and again and again. Which is why I said infinity could be very big or very small.

– Ah.

– At last!

–

–

– So... so what’s the biggest thing in the world?

– Mount Everest is the tallest mountain. Asia is the largest continent...

– Big, Dad. Big! What’s the biggest thing?

– What do you mean by big? ...

The Trophy

Bill and Edie hung the antlers in the hall beside the kitchen door.

The head gave their house a Highland feel, a sense of wilderness and adventure that was just what it had lacked. The adornments they had placed on the wall – Edie’s plates and Bill’s old maps – had a dry suburban look, so out of place in the semi-wild of Sutherland in which they had made their home. Edie knew a pair of antlers would astonish friends who came from the South, and perhaps arouse a secret envy; whilst Bill took pride in hanging his cap and scarf from the lowest points, and suggested they should rename their new home, calling it ‘the lodge’.

Not that they were hunters, or even sportsmen, themselves. Beside the occasional game of tennis when they were young and newly-wed, their sole exertion was rambling. Walking they loved with unvoiced passion. Being surrounded and at one with nature. Feeling its power, its majesty, laid out before them and all around them. And they its vassals, bent in homage, even as they strode within it. Even as they watched. That was why, on Bill’s retirement, they had left the South and moved up here, where nothing would intrude on them but the sun and the wind and the rain. They came for that, not for the sport. Bill had never fired a gun – not even in his army years – at any living thing.

And the antlers weren’t a living thing. They may have been so once. Now, though, they had been transformed, transmuted to a sterile state of after-life. Like a mummified corpse, a dried wild flower, they were an object of curiosity – not part of a body that had once had breath. Bill justified

it to himself. He wouldn't have shot a deer to get them; he wouldn't have bought them in a shop. But, if someone had offered to give them to him, if they were just being thrown away, then well, why not, thought Bill.

He and Edie had been walking on the hill which steeply climbed behind their house, up to the tree line beyond. They had scarcely been in Scotland a month, and were still exploring the paths and trails which cut through the bracken and startled the gorse. There, on the border of the estate, they had seen a whitewashed building standing alone which they mistook for a crofter's hut. A man was sitting on a log by the door, fastidiously sharpening his knife. When they waved he beckoned them over to him, and before too long they were deep in talk – in the history and the mystery of the moors.

The man's name was Thom. He was the stalker employed by the estate. He had, he told them, followed his grandfather and father before him in tracking deer on this land. Thom knew the moors as if by instinct. He could trace on his palm every undulation of every valley which stretched from his bothy, here near the coast, to ten miles west. He knew each tree and burn and stump of rock that lay concealed beneath the tread. He knew each bog, each eagle's nest. He knew each print pressed in the peat; which plants grew where and when they flowered; the name of every fern.

And he knew deer. He knew them individually. He watched the herds as they roamed across the invisible boundary of his estate. He remembered each beast from the year before. He knew their habits, their number, their age. Unseen, he watched them grow through time, from bold young stag in

bachelor groups to the imperial beast which lorded over a whole harem of hind.

And he shot them. Culled them, was the term he used, as if to soften the deed. He took out the weak and those that were injured; those that were old, that were past their prime. Yet most of the time he was merely a guide, escorting strangers up the hill to do the culling for him. People paid several hundred pounds for the kick of firing a gun; they came from the South, they came from abroad – rich people fired by the thrill of the kill. Each time he told them to pull the trigger – aiming at a selected beast – the bounty was added to their bill. The irony was they got nothing for it: they didn't even keep the meat. That was sent to smart hotels to enrich their menus and please their guests. All the shooters got was an empty shell. They even had to pay ten quid if they wanted to keep the antlers.

Ten quid!

There, leaning up against the wall, Thom pointed out a pair. Ten quid someone paid him to chisel those off. And the bastard hadn't even bothered to collect them. Too stinking rich to care. The shame of it was they were rather a fine pair. They were from a twelve pointer, well-proportioned, intact, from a beast weighing fifteen stone. Thom remembered it well.

Bill and Edie were invited to look. The antlers were not part of a head. They had been removed, and grew from the skull bone. A bone that was white and polished, like stone. Neatly extracted and clinically clean. So far removed from the living thing that it didn't to be wrong.

So what was Thom to do with them now? Thom grunted dismay and looked away. He supposed they would just lie there and rot. Unless they fancied the antlers themselves? Would Bill and Edie like to take them?

A short while later the couple departed, clutching their unexpected prize.



There were two holes conveniently placed in the bone. All it took was a couple of nails, and there was their trophy, standing proud, firmly fixed to the wall. Bill and Edie were both quite pleased. Both were secretly overjoyed, though they couldn't articulate why.

That night, after Edie had retired to bed, Bill stood in the hall and pondered over what he should put on the points. He was tempted to hang his cap and scarf. But perhaps he should drape his coat. Or maybe just leave the antlers bare. Giddy with new-found interest, Bill's mind raced with fancy. His breathing fast, his heartrate rapid – pulsing the blood through his arteries. He checked his emotions deliberately, forcing his eyes and his thoughts away. Tomorrow he would experiment. He would pace this pleasure for himself.

Turning off the lights, Bill glanced back into the irregular darkness, seeing the sharp, misshapen object as if it was growing out of the wall – awkward and skeletal – caught in the wash of wan half-light reflected from a spectral moon.



Shortly before dawn, Edie and Bill were awoken by a noise. A curious round, low, hollow moan. More melancholy than Highland cattle. Rich and bass and dense. Piercing the walls of their idle fortress, vibrating around their room.

Again, and yet again. The sound.

Protected by the grey of night from the fear of each other's uncertainty, they lay in bed and did not move, nor think to speak – their blind backs facing one another – as if desiring to seem asleep.



The next day they spent alone from each other, hugging their silence like secrets, close. By nightfall their solitude stood bare before them – it had grown to a cold and piercing pain which sliced right through their fragile bodies, stripping raw the skin. In an effort to heal the unmentionable wound, they decided to treat themselves to a meal. They drove into town, parked their car in the high street, and were crossing the road towards a restaurant when the stalker spotted the pair.

Thom, fired by several rounds of Scotch, crossed the road to intercept before they could retreat. He snatched at their arms and pulled them towards him, drawing them into his confidence. Had they heard it last night, that single beast, wandering alone through the trees? What a fuss it was making! Coming down low to bellow despair, depriving the village of sleep. Thom laughed. Could it have been their own stag that escaped? Had it forced its way through their door? Had it unhinged from the wall and bolted away, to wander wild on the bleak hillside in the early hours before dawn?

As swiftly as they deemed polite, Bill and Edie bade farewell and walked away towards the restaurant. The night reared up before them, hard and black. The sky hung close – timeless, endless – sucking life from the lights of the town, sucking life as it splayed its fingers over Thom’s moors and the heart of Scotland. The moon and a few transparent stars hung frosted, frozen in the void.

Through the doors of the restaurant a welcome stream of heat and light bid them enter. The two sat in silence: happy to cradle their solitude in the easy banter of the busy tables bustling with noise to their sides. Neither Edie nor Bill were superstitious, yet both were caught by a curious thought – a thought which rose from the pits of their stomachs, coaxed by the chatter and the warmth and the light, till the thinking of it became a reprieve: there, close to a fire, both safe and secure – a confession that both felt obliged to admit. The stark and distressing revelation that the wretched stag had come down from the hill in search of the antlers torn from its skull.

Neither husband nor wife shared this vivid image, nor spoke of it to themselves. They persuaded each other in their own minds that the beast which once had owned the antlers was being served at the Savoy. No, their reasoning was more remote, still more dispersed from guilt. The antlers were entirely detached: they were removed from the stag. The antlers were an emblem, a symbol; a remembrance of stag, and no more. They weren’t a part of life or death; they weren’t a part of deer at all – of deer, or venison. In the convivial, close confines of the peopled restaurant, surrounded by a confusion of voices, a distortion of truth interwoven with lies, Bill and Edie suppressed the whisper that fingered into their souls.

By the end of the meal their bellies were full; their conversation revived. Thom was forgotten, as was the memory – the feel of the sound that spread with the dawn, that punctured their home and was carved in their minds. And the antlers, too, just a memory. Flushed and glowing with warmth and wine, Bill and Edie fell back on the night, threading their way through the pools of light which spun from the restaurant windows. The patchwork street housed familiar objects: post boxes, parking meters, litterbins. For the first time since they had moved to Scotland it seemed a comfort to shield themselves from the hostile night with these mundane idols of their urban past.

Bill started the car. He drove slowly down the road till they slipped in the sheath of murmuring blackness, weaving a path between the trees. The beam of their lights threw up before them the urgent white lines, their regular pattern, marked down the centre of the road. To their sides, in the sudden fringe of that light, the giddy spectre of endless trees dashed back into eternal darkness. The night, impenetrable, immense, leant its weight against the skin of their shallow, half-lit world. Closer, yet closer, the dark bore upon them, stealing around the sides of their car, stifling the stale air within.

Bill hit the brakes suddenly, violently, pulling the car to a halt.

Thirty feet in front of them, facing them and blocking their way, stood a stag. Caught in the curtain of their headlights, its body shone an amber-red, and deep, blood red were its eyes. It stood quite motionless, staring towards them. Not transfixed like a terrified hare, but pensive, unperturbed, and proud. It raised its head an imperceptible fraction, as if

it was wondering where they had come from, and what such bringers of light should be. Then, with deliberate, delicate steps it walked into the invisible trees, and was consumed by the night.

In its place, the empty road, washed by the artificial light, seemed devoid of life. Meaningless, purposeless. The engine had stalled; only the tick of the clock broke the silence that filled the car, and stood against the stagnation beyond.

The night as if holding its breath.

Edie and Bill got out of the car. They stood in the space where the deer had been. They squinted in the glare of the headlights; stunned by the brightness they peered up the road. Had a deer really been there? Was that what they saw? Why did the creature not move? Separately, in the depths of their minds, both were caught by the very same thought – laden with cautious exultation, with the fierce desire for exoneration – the stag they had seen had antlers.

As their eyes grew accustomed to the pitch, they scoured the trees, expectant, eager: fearful of catching sight of the stag, there in the deadlight, watching them. Their ears were keen to the depth of silence, wanting and anxious to hear a moan come barking up through the waiting forest.



But they did not hear the stag again. Not that night, nor in those that followed. As if stung by a swelling sense of guilt, Bill and Edie found themselves pursuing their walks with greater haste – staying out longer, traveling further – watching, listening, intent. If they were seeking some sign

of the stag then they were thwarted on that quest. The moors opened up a wealth of life and colour which bled unimaginable beauty to the city-folk who had never seen, nor thought they would see, such gems. But deer were not amongst them. Even Thom evaded them. Were they to have violated some law – some natural code, some local custom – they could not have been punished more. All trace of deer had gone. All but the antlers screwed to their wall, perpetually fixed in their memory. Endearing, appalling, in equal measure.



Summer had come, and with it the start of the hunting season. Bill and Edie were forced to restrict the scope of their walks now the stalkers were up on the hill. To substitute for the lack of stag, Bill turned to the antlers instead. A fascination fired within him, like one who arrives at an accident, who takes secret pleasure in another's pain. Now, he researched the antlers' journey – sawn and boiled and scraped and plucked from the skull of a living thing. The more Bill learnt, the more he hid his new-found knowledge from his wife. Edie, he felt, would dispose of the antlers if she knew what they really were.

But then, he questioned, why did he keep them? What were they a trophy of?



Some time after, wrapped up in wool and waterproofs, prepared to depart on their daily walk, Edie spotted a speck of fluff caught on the crown of Bill's cap. Telling him to stand still, she stood on the lowest step of the stairs to

pluck the fleck away. Closer her fingers came to his cap; closer her eyes to his head.

Then she screamed.

She smacked the cap clean off his head, and started scrabbling round in his hair. Bill twisted away, confused and angry. He stooped to retrieve his cap. Then he, too, saw it. There, on the fringe, was a black-eyed maggot, arching its puffy, white body up at him as it wallowed luxuriously in the tweed.

Bill went to the bathroom and washed his hair. He scrubbed his body repeatedly, like a man possessed, unheeding of pain. He felt sick, he wanted to be physically sick. He wanted to break from this rancid skin which bred disease: from this corrupt and corporeal frame. He felt his flesh like a slab of meat stood in the sun to putrefy. He shuddered to acknowledge this body his.

When he came downstairs, Edie was still sitting on the lowest step, hunched in herself, a misshapen ball, unwilling, unable to move. Averting her eyes, she pointed up to the antlers fixed on the wall.

Moving closer, Bill inspected the head. The fine twelve points like delicate fingers, curled to the ceiling, scratching the sky, sprung from the base of the neat white skull bone. All clinically clean and polished like stone. All, except for the joint on the left, where the brown antler's root emerged from the bone. There, where the skin must once have been, Bill could discern a clutch of hair. A minuscule, fractional clasp of skin. And clung to the decomposing clod a moving sea of ecstatic white: a fierce little clump of maggots.



The strangest thing of all – after the shock and the nausea, the acknowledgement and the shame – was the realisation of how alive the antlers once had been. Of how alive they were still. There was no disguising what they were. Edie and Bill had nailed to their wall a part of a carcass, a cadaver which was mutilated and maimed.

Swathed in plastic and rubber gloves, Bill took the once-live prize from the wall and secured it in a bag. The antlers – the same they had hugged so closely to them as they walked from Thom's hut back to their home, which they had hung with pride in their hall, which Edie had polished with love and care – were cast from them and thrown in a tip. A plate of Edie's was placed in their stead, whilst Bill learned to hang his cap and scarf on a peg on the back of the washroom door.

That was where it ended for them. That was where it should have been closed.

Though it wasn't the antlers themselves, Bill reflected after a while. It was the maggots. If there hadn't been any of those bloated white bodies then no doubt the antlers would still be there, taking pride of place on the wall. And however he might shudder at the thought of that mass seething and feasting on decay, Bill couldn't help but own his regret, and concede how much he missed the head. It had seemed such a feature; it gave such pleasure. It seemed such a waste now it sat in a tip. Now their home was no more than an ordinary house, devoid of the one thing that made it different. It was dry and dull like that house in the

suburbs from which they had long dreamed of finding escape.



Autumn arrived. The shooting season was growing long. Edie and Bill had seen the fishermen casting their flies on the peat-black waters; they had seen the stalkers climbing the hill; they had heard the haphazard barrage of shotguns discharged from around the loch at dusk. The hill was alive with the bringers of death, with the sounds of death, with the smell. It rolled down the valley and into their home, infecting them with its stain. Yet they knew this death brought life to the village; it was this death that sustained the estate. It brought money, it brought work, it brought food. It brought as much as it took away. Life and death. Death and life. And that one moment more frightening than all: that curious state where life meets death, where each stares into the other's eyes.

Bill was out on his own on the hill. He was near the fringe of the estate, on the lower slopes where they first met Thom. He had come to break free from his sterile home; its emptiness, its soullessness. In truth, he was missing the antlers. If he could secure an unsoiled head he was convinced he could persuade his wife to take it back again. Thom was certain to have another. Thom would have boiled it and scraped it clean. This time Bill would check and make sure.

There was no one at the hut when Bill arrived. The entrance was padlocked fast, the shutters closed. Two pairs of antlers stood by the wall, and the smell of blood crept from under the door. Bill walked round the hut in search of

Thom; he screwed up his eyes and scoured the heather. Then he turned in the direction of home.

Two hundred yards down the slide of the slope he came across them, in a burn, facing away from him. There was Thom and a huntsman. And with them a stag. Thom was wrestling with the antlers, forcing the corpse across the stream. Its belly had been sliced open and emptied, its intestines ripped from their still-warm cage and discarded on the hill above for scavengers to feed. Now the awkward body slithered on the heather, leaving a trail of blood in its wake, like a grotesque, lopsided snail. Its eyes were dead, their fire was gone. The large pink tongue hung stupidly in the half-open hollow of its mouth. Thom was bringing it back towards the hut, towards the abattoir. He was manhandling the body across the moor, whilst the paying guest shouldered the gun and looked on.

At that moment Thom turned round and saw Bill. He dropped the antlers with a curse, raising a hand and smiling in welcome; then raising the hand towards his head, rubbing the blood into his face as he wiped the sweat away.

Bill stared back, embarrassed, ashamed.

He could have gone to admire the beast. He could have helped them cross the burn. He could, if Thom was so inclined, have followed them into the hut. He could have watched Thom as he worked – sawing the antlers from the skull, cutting the tendons from the legs, hanging the corpse to let it bleed. He could have shared a dram with them, passing a hipflask around. He could have heard the tale they told, of how it had been shot and when. He could have shaken both their hands, applauding a good job done.

He could have done, and he could not.

Bill waved and forced a smile. He tipped his cap. Then he set off, fast, down the hill.



Though Bill said nothing to Edie that day, she saw a change in him. Their morning walks, which they still took daily, drew closer and closer about their home, tightening like a noose. Now Bill found reasons why they couldn't go far, they couldn't climb up beyond the trees, they couldn't traverse the estate. Nowhere they went where they might spy deer. He steered their walks along the coast, by the estuary, or close to the village, as though restricted, on a leash. She didn't ask him why this was; she feared to ask, to know the truth. Instead she gave him time and distance. She waited, and she watched.

Then, one day, when crossing a field close to the road which led into town, they came upon a stag. It was standing so still they didn't see it till they were less than a hundred yards away. And now they were suddenly facing it, caught in a cultivated space where they never thought a deer would come.

Neither Bill nor Edie moved. Foolish though they felt themselves, they were afraid of further movement frightening away the stag. It had seen them, it had surely smelt them; they knew it must have done so long before they could come this close. And yet it chose to stay. Here, in this field, so far from the moor, it almost appeared to be tame; as if resigned to stay where it stood regardless of how close they came.

It was an admirable beast – muscular, well-proportioned, sleek; with a coat the colour of fading embers – though it held its powerful head to one side, rocking it to and fro. The creature before them had shed its wildness. There was no depth in its eyes, no spring in its limbs. Though still, in its poise, its rigid frame, there was dignity, and a grace.

Bill took a step towards the stag. He moved instinctively. He didn't want the beast to run, yet he felt convinced it wouldn't. Their eyes had met, they continued to meet. There was understanding in both.

He came to within sixty yards. Then fifty. Thirty.

The stag followed Bill with its eyes, unmoving save for the roll of its head, rocking from side to side. There was a wisdom in those eyes. There was life, and death; and both were blended into a single state of being. This was no wild beast. Or, if wild it was, then Bill felt the urge to feel as the stag. To know how it felt to be wild, to be free. To share in its agony, in its bliss. To share in its life and its death. To share in its being, its self.

Now Bill had come to within fifteen yards. And now it was only ten.

Then Bill caught sight of the hole in its side, twelve inches behind its front leg.

The stag had been shot – it was shot in the stomach – and now it was bleeding to death. It had traveled much distance; it had come all the way from the moor through the trees to this field. Dying and running, it had come this far, eluding the stalkers and the final bullet, though caught in the motion of death. Death crawled over its faultless body. It shuddered its death, it nodded its death, and death sat

proud in its dying eyes. The stag could run no more. It could not move. Its legs were locked like those of a child that knows without knowing how it knows that even the smallest, most gradual of movements is likely to make it fall.

Bill was so near to the stag he could almost touch it. He felt that if he could just reach out, if only he could extended his hand, his life might be transferred to the other – to the living carcass before him. He felt that in making that single contact, all his life would ebb away – the façade, the intellect, the self – and instead the creature within would arise: noble and rude, untamed and free, born of both life and death.

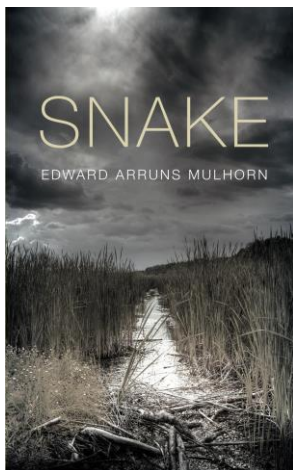
There were shouts from somewhere behind him. The stalkers had caught up with their prey.

Bill turned and saw two men emerge from the trees in the blind middle-distance. Thom was waving his hands in warning, the other pointing a gun. Now Edie was also waving at him – Edie who stood in a different world, a lifetime distant from him.

Bill looked back towards the beast. It was only him, him and this creature that stood unmoving, watching the hunters, watching Edie, watching this farce borne out before them. So irrelevant, so superficial to they who knew the secret of all things, to they who were so at peace with themselves. They who were breathing both life and death. Life and death. Death and life. And now this, this subliminal state of being where life meets death, where each stares into the other's eyes, as Bill stared into the eyes of his brother stag.

Then, as the lesser world coughed and was extinguished,
Bill bent forward and touched the deer.

By the same author –



The ley is a world apart. A paradise, a prison. A raw and elemental wilderness; a place of lost innocence. Bowing to seasons, to wind and to fire, to the shocks that nature thrusts upon it.

Within its labyrinth of reed, creatures search and stumble blind. Vengeful, beautiful, unforgiving. Living and thriving, surviving and dying, feeding off themselves.

Into this merciless world the girl is lured irresistibly. She is drawn to it, repelled by it, drowned in its subterfuge and shame.

Trapped and unable to escape, she is changed irretrievably, beyond the power of salvation. Beyond redemption. Transformed and reborn, only to be compelled to confront her ecstatic nightmare repeatedly. Locked in a cycle of death and life.



Ever since he arrived in the village of Nettlesden, Matty has been warned not to enter the wood. It has lain undisturbed for years. The trees within it creak and groan perpetual pain; they yawn an invisible agony at the life that lies buried within. No one has reason to go near, except for Uriah.

But Matty is enthralled by its savage beauty, and entering deep into its heart he begins to discover its secrets. Things that the villagers thought dead and forgotten; and things they thought were alive.

What Matty uncovers prompts shame and denial, setting the village against itself, and threatening all those who live there.

Visit www.edwardarrunsmulhorn.com to find details of future publications, or contact eam@edwardarrunsmulhorn.com