

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 pools of green dissolved into a wretched cliff, standing hunched, its visage haggard, clutching the fringe of a cowering bay. Tapered fingers of fallen rock clawed at the sandy stretch of beach, and were devoured by 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 in a makeshift raft to fend off storms. Facing them, over the line of a lane, a bright bunched vein of low thatched cottage, mute and white, pressed cheek to cheek, crouched beneath the threatening crags.

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

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

open and 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 which creased the discoloured ceiling, flakes of paint lay trapped in cobwebs, shivering to the spider's touch. On the footstool to her side, an opened book with faded covers, placed face-down, as yet unread. A pile of sealed letters trapped beneath an awkward stack of files. Magazines still in their wrappers. A phone run out of charge. Spoiled photographs with faces fierce with phantom life and laughter, strewn and scattered on the floor, forever 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 spent its tears in the sink. She could trace the random path of the fly, pressing its body against the pane, 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, hunged on pegs, with aching arms.

Mrs Pengelly stood, unthinking.

Mrs Pengelly stood, unknowing.

Mrs Pengelly smiled

Laggan

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 very 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.’

‘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 it was always the same.’

‘It is the same.’

‘You said it goes faster when you’re having fun.’

‘It seems to go faster, though in fact it actually goes just the same.’

‘That doesn’t make sense, if sometimes it goes faster and sometimes slower, but really it’s all the same.’

‘That’s the way it is. Something called relativity.’

‘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 how old you are.’

‘You know how old I am! You don’t need to be told!’

‘Well, we need it for other things too. To make sense of days and weeks and months and years. Without time we wouldn’t know where we were. We wouldn’t know what year it was.’

‘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’re hungry.’

‘That’s true. But we wouldn’t know for sure.’

‘Why would we want to?’

‘Because we would. We need to know when things are, and how long they take.’

‘Why? What’s the point when some things take longer than others?’

‘Well, imagine what life without time would be like. Friends wouldn’t know when to come and 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?’

‘It didn’t start. It’s always existed. 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, only we haven’t always had a way to measure it. We grow up sensing that when things come to an end they go into the past. And sensing that other things will happen at some point in the future, even though we don’t know when. Time goes in a line that way, and 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 things we’ve invented to help us make sense of what we mean when we talk about 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. 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 much the same way. It’s the way we measure it that would change, that’s all.’

‘So time’s been around forever?’

‘Yup.’

‘And when does it 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?’

‘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 one...’

‘Which one?’

‘The one 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 for long enough it might come round again, and then we could measure it.’

‘Dad?’

‘Yes, Jessie.’

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

‘Who knows? It might just last forever...’

Çirak

One from the Flock

There are times when I feel sorry for sheep. Just occasionally, when I least expect it, this great surge of sympathy wells up within me, from somewhere deep and hidden inside. There is something so painfully, tragically helpless in seeing them huddling – panicked, defenceless – prey to all with teeth and a hunger – utterly harmless, blameless, absurd.

Of course, this feeling doesn't come often, and it only occurs in the presence of sheep. It glances across my mind for an instant, before I can drown it with lies. Then sympathy hardens into disdain, and I go on eating meat. I think that is it – it is gone for good. But after a while it comes again, it surfaces from the depths of nowhere, and sullies my vulnerable mind.

I remember the feeling when walking along the cliffs above the village of Reiff. There was a group of us, leaping across the crooked rocks that mark the boundary with the coast. Then stopping to peer down those monstrous crags at the surging, foaming, weed-tangled sea – our noses squashed on the hard, creased slabs as we lay on our bellies at the very edge – cautiously, eagerly, flaunting our fear.

For several minutes we watched two climbers: young men with rucksacks, and ropes, and crampons; with a sack of chalk and a string of carabiners hanging like baubles from their waists. We saw them down an impossible distance, pressed onto the rock near the fierce, ugly sea, with torturous movement clawing its face as they crawled, inch by inch, back to life.

A dog came running sideways towards us, ignoring us, lying down out of the wind, in our fold – ears cocked, eyes alert to the distance. I turned to watch it scenting the air. And then it was running, fast and away, its body held low like a curious fox, scuttling crablike with quick-footed steps, slinking over the hill.

We got to our feet and followed behind it: daringly, hungrily, sensing the hunt. At the summit we tumbled down in the heather, burying our bodies in snatches of sprigs.

A shadowed figure, lean and hunched, with a wide-brimmed hat and a long gnarled crook, with a featureless smudge of skin for a face, rose on the hill beyond. And there, to his side, poised and coiled in the curl of the slope, our fox-dog paced excited patrol.

For an instant, my eyes were drawn from their shapes, to a path that led to a wind-torn beach. On the ridge above it a dry-stone cottage sat in a half-sheltered bite of the rock – no garden, no curtains, no light, and no life – only a fragile wisp of smoke breathing out of the tottering stack.

The creature before us raised his staff, and the fox-dog circled round to his side, gliding behind the line of the hill. A moment of emptiness, and of silence. Then we could hear, against the wind, a furious mass of lamentation – a meek, sharp, fearful, searing cry – the insistent bleat of plaintive sheep, hung on the blinded air.

Then, suddenly, repulsively, a spew of sheep, in one contorted mass of fleece, spilling down the slanted ground, as if they retched from deep within the churning

gut of the dense hill which stood before us – flowing in a clump of thickened clods, clung to the contours of the slope, driven through the rocks and gorse, aimless and directionless, propelled by their own weight. And on their heels the fervent fox-dog, stepping with elastic legs over the quivering bed of heather, snapping at the stragglers' tails, shivering at the thrilling chase, pouncing, pointing, slinking sideways, harassing the headless horde, inexorably closing them down.

Down and into the foot of the valley, with nowhere further to fall, the throng abruptly came to a halt.

And then, a most peculiar cry.

We all looked up.

On the beach, a handful of silent gatherers tore rocks from the sand and tossed them seaward, clattering down the extending shore, as they searched for mussels amidst the weed.

We retraced our steps to the cliff, and walked along its jagged edge till we came to a person we knew. It was one of the climbers.

He was sat on a rock, his back to the clouds and his knees drawn high, clasping his body close in his arms, as the wind scuffed at him – his clothes and his hair – and the strange iron shapes that hung from his side swayed, clinking and chiming against the stone.

He was sitting barely a yard from the edge, looking curiously over the edge.

We turned, and looked down, too.

Then we were running, fast and away – away from the cliffs and across the heather – through the gorse and into the face of the wild wind screaming her lament – screaming and forcing the tears to my eyes till I could not see, and I could not feel, and all I could hear was the pound of the waves thumping against the rocks like a curse, carving into my brain. Drawing me down, attempting to drown me, breaking upon me and blasting me deep beneath layers of liquid where I could not breathe, nor save myself from the tide. I tried to swim, but my arms were locked in the cruel embrace of the jealous sea; my legs were seized by the fierce suction, dragging me down to its bed. I strove to reach the spume-strewn waves that romped above my giddy head, and through the surf my watery eyes saw grey-green mountains closed around the far-off foaming shore. And there, it seemed, I spied a flock of sheep locked in a sheltering circle, held in a blanket of kindly wool, guarded by a tall gaunt figure holding a crook, with a wide-brimmed hat, with a fox-dog faithfully standing by. I tried to cry, but could feel no tears against my cheek, nor feel their pain. All I could hear was a soothing sound – an angelic song – stunning the vale with its harmony, accompanied by an innocent chorus: the shameless bleat of sheep.

Summer Isles

Space

‘How big is big?’

‘It depends. You can’t really say.’

‘Well, when does a thing stop being small and start being big?’

‘When it’s bigger than average.’

‘What’s average?’

‘Average is in the middle. Not small and not big. Slap bang in 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. If you’re round about six then that’s average. It’s kind of in the middle.’

‘Jack’s almost seven and he’s much smaller than me.’

‘That’s because being older isn’t the same as being bigger. Whenever we compare 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.’

‘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. I guess 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.'

'If they're the same then how can you compare them?!'

'You can compare anything. Though it's 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 smaller than average.'

'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 merely 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. No one knows for sure. Space is infinite. That means it goes on and on forever. Which means we can never be certain what the biggest thing is that exists.'

'How can it go on forever?'

'Because nobody's found where it ends. No one can even say for sure that 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. Then what have we got?’

‘Half a half.’

‘A quarter, yes.’

‘A quarter?’

‘Yes, that’s what it’s called. 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?’

‘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!’

‘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 disappear, you could keep on chopping it forever. You could chop it for infinity.'

'Who would want to eat it then?'

'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!'

'_'

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'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...?'

Çirali

The Judas Tree

For as long as anyone could remember the Judas tree had stood in the garden of my parent's pretty coast-path cottage, overlooking the sea. It was gnarled and crooked, weary with age even when they first moved in. It was part of the landscape; a part of the land. It was named on a map in the nearby church, and served as a pointer to ramblers and climbers, guiding those travelers who walked on the cliffs.

For those unfamiliar with the tree, the Judas is a handsome type, though scarcely more than a bush. It has a low and crouching canopy which is decked with purple-pink flowers in the spring, which blossom before the coming of leaves. Its Latin name is *Cercis Siliquastrum*, though its popular name derives from the Bible. It originates from what is now Turkey, and is most famously carved in an ancient woodcut by a learned man named Castor Durante, which shows the figure of a hanged man swinging from one of its boughs.

During those storms which ravaged the coast when I was a teen and still living at home, this tree stood alone, a steadfast presence, angled into the spoiling wind, resilient, forever defiant. There are not an abundance of trees by the coast, and those that there are grow contorted and low beneath the batter of constant squalls, stunted and perished by salt. Their roots cling desperately to an earth weakened by sand and worsened by slate, which slides like a slow-creeping beast of such size that its razure is only seen in its wake. This Judas rode out those merciless storms, suffering neither the loss of a

limb, nor falling prey to the greater harm of having its heart-strings ripped asunder, its trunk blown over, its stout, proud frame laid low.

The following spring it came into flower, and its bloom was all the more pleasing that year for being the only trespass of colour to break the perennial green of the lawn besides the wild primrose which grew at its skirt.

That Easter my parents decided to stay with my aunt in the heart of the Cotswolds. Being unwilling to go there myself, I persuaded them to let me remain. I would look after the house with the help of some friends I invited down for the week.

I waved my parents off on the Thursday, then went to the shops for booze and fags, knowing my friends would be late.

The first to arrive was my mate Tom Lewis, who drove from the North with his sister, Zoe. They had picked up a bloke called Cooper in Bristol – an amiable man who I lost touch with after, who went on to become an MP. Then there was Pete, with a girl called Claire, who fancied each other in secret. Bill and Lizzie were there, of course. And the final person to make up the group was someone I'd never met. Adam. That was his name. I guess he had come across Tom on his travels, for it was Tom who suggested I asked him down. He had come from abroad and was on his own; he knew no one in England, and had nowhere to stay. He arrived on the afternoon train at Totnes. I remember picking him up. He seemed willful and headstrong, and game for a laugh. I felt glad he was one of the crew.

Their journeys down had been long and fraught; it was late by the time the last had arrived. We ate pizza and had a couple of drinks, then everyone crashed out where they could, knowing the coming day would be full.

It was my lot, as host, to sleep on the sofa; and a very rough night it was, too. I woke at half-hourly intervals, sticky with warmth and cold with sweat. I wandered round the shadowy room; I went to the kitchen and had some milk; I plumped up the cushions and slumped on them, restless; I closed my eyes and strained for oblivion, hating myself for being awake. So it went on through the tireless night, as I consciously counted the hours. Though there came a point when I rolled on my back and found a fierce stream of light carving a path through a gap in the curtains, brutally blinding my eyes.

It was day.

It was a beautiful day. Crisp and clear. Clean-cut. Despite that, it took an age to awaken the others. I corralled them all round the breakfast table shortly before it was time for lunch.

Cornflakes finished, we convened in the pub, and when that closed for the afternoon we dawdled down to the beach. We sat on the sand, in the generous glare, full of beer and fat on the day, staring at the mesmeric waves.

We played catch, and bulldog, and tag. The girls went paddling in the sea, while I dug a moat in the sand with Bill. The afternoon burnt off and fled; the clouds were drawn in a single fold. The brilliance had been bled from the day by the time we took to the gradual path which led

over the backbone of the cliff, and across the field, till it stumbled up to my parent's house.

Pete was walking ahead with Claire. He was telling her stories from previous summers, when he and I and some of the others had built a barbecue on the beach using driftwood snagged in the jaws of rocks, or swept up onto the sand. Claire was enchanted by his tales; she turned around and challenged us all to do the same that night. The weather was unseasonably mild. We could go to the beach once the sun had set; we could warm ourselves round a fire.

Besides, it would give me a chance to burn the last of the trees laid low by the storms – to build a pyre for the broken carcass which lay on the side of the lawn unloved, rotting and crying for mercy.

Two of the girls were dispatched to buy food, while the rest of us scavenged for picnic utensils, and took it in turn to chop up the trunk.

I was in the kitchen with Coop when we heard a car draw up in the drive. We charged out into the dying day to see what the girls had bought.

It's strange how it all comes back to me now, those timeless events from the past. I remember that moment so clearly. As though it happened just yesterday. As though it is happening, here in my mind. In the certain knowledge I will see it again – always and ever the same. Every feature of it is caught in my thought; it is captured completely. It plays out identically every time. Lizzie's door is swinging open; I can see the crest of her head. Zoe is cradling crisps in her arms; her face is set alight

with a smile; she is shouting out loud to those on the lawn. Bill is leaning his weight on the axe; he is wiping his brow and flicking away the fragments of bark which cling to his skin. Pete is crouching low to his side, taking the strain of a branch on his knees. Tom is lost in a tangle of leaves, perched in the shade of the sun-struck Judas, clapping his hands like a giddy monkey, delighting in all that he sees.

All of them captured in a glance, suspended in a pocket of motion, as I charge through the door with Coop at my heels, hearing his breath in my ear.

I know what I am intending to do – what I would do still if I lived it again – what I was denied for not having the chance. I have played it back a thousand times. So often it almost seems real. As though by the power of thought alone I could persuade myself of the lie. As though that lie could alter events. As though those altered events could assuage the guilt which whispers into my ear at night, when not quite asleep, when wanting to wake. Even now, after all the weight of these years, even now, when none but myself are alive.

I am on the point of shouting at Tom, for I sense the branches are straining beneath him, I fear his bulk will force them to snap. The words are forming within my mind; they are taking shape in my mouth. But before the sounds emerge from my lips – each time, every time I have tried to speak – Adam appears from the side of the house, he screams his delight and gallops across the aching stretch of awaiting lawn to where the others are trapped in the moment, as fixed and immobile as figurines.

Adam is running so fast I can tell he's unable to break his relentless career before he pitches into the hedge, or smacks against the side of the car. I can see it clearly; with certainty. All of us watching him know what will happen; all of us frozen, unable to act.

As he comes towards Bill, as he threatens to pass him, Adam throws his arms up into the air, he catches the bough of the Judas tree on which Tom is sitting, half-hidden by leaves.

In that instant, Adam's figure turns from a furious blur to a pendulum tracing the path of a perfect arc. Then the speed and the weight of their bodies combine, they exert their force on the innocent tree, and with a scream which sounds almost human – which seems to emanate from within – the trunk is divided, neatly, completely, almost exactly in half. Half of the tree descends to the earth, with the bodies of Tom and Adam caught in it; and half stays standing, awkwardly – a cruel gash torn in its side.

It always happens this way. Always, forever the same. I know what will happen before it ensues. Even that first time of watching it happen: in that measureless moment before it occurs. That infinite moment. I see it so clearly, presented so slowly. It seems to continue forever. As if to protract the agony. More slowly, more consciously every time. Enough for me to absorb every detail; enough for none of the pain to be lost.

A lifespan in the blink of an eye.

Bill let the axe fall onto the grass; Pete rose; the girls ran onto the lawn. They were dragging the two bodies clear of the wood before Coop and I had arrived.

Adam was giggling, nervous, excited. Tom was nursing his knee. Though it wasn't long before they stood up. They had some scratches, and a bit of blood, but neither seemed to be badly hurt. Zoe placed Adam's arm on her shoulder; she shuffled him back inside the house to inspect his invisible cuts. Tom came towards me, visibly shaken, though unharmed apart from a stiff right leg. He was quick to blame himself, and contrite; he apologized over and over again, for what he'd been doing, and what he had done. He offered impossible recompense for having destroyed the tree.

I thanked him for his sincerity – I am glad in the knowledge I thanked him then – but there was nothing that he could do, for what was done was done.

It was done. It was all set in motion.

At twilight, before the dusk had spoiled, before it had given sway to the night, we slid the logs on a plastic sheet, across the field and along the path, until we stood on top of the cliff which rose overlooking the beach. From there we toppled our bounty down.

We returned to the house, then retraced our steps, bringing with us warm clothes and food. We reached the shelter of the beach, and settled ourselves in the sand. We dug a trench which we lined with slate, and we laid a fire on its flat smooth stone. We stacked the logs in a stumpy wall which we built upwind of the pit.

Then we put a match to the brittle kindling, and watched it melt into flame.

The fire was fierce and scorched the skin; we sat in the sand in the curl of the beach, entranced by the living

blaze. It burnt off the shame of breaking the tree; it cauterized much of the pain. Yet it wasn't the same for us all. Tom sat alone at the base of the cliff, as though unable to heal. He was rueful and silent, he kept to himself, removed from the eye of the flame.

By contrast, Adam's new interest in Zoe proved stronger than any regret. The only words he had spoken to me since hobbling into the house with her were to suggest we should burn the remains of the tree.

I had opposed the idea. The wood was fresh and too sappy to burn. That was the reason I gave. Though, in truth, I felt it was wrong to dispose of the Judas, to hide its disgrace; to hasten away all recollection before he had voiced his remorse. I was also possessed by a curious thought we could resurrect its broken trunk, we could reconcile the two halves. They were both so laden with purple-pink blossom; both were so vital, so clearly alive.

We ate burgers and sausages, crunchy with sand, squeezed between a fistful of bun that dripped sauce and warm butter onto our legs. Coop had brought his battered guitar and strummed a melody into the gloom, whispering lyrics unheard. Pete and Claire sat close to the warmth; he was combing the sand for her buried toes. Bill lay flat on his back in their shadow, searching into the sky for stars. Lizzie was humming Coop's tune. Tom sat in the hug of the cliff, rubbing his knee as if to prolong the infamy, and his sense of guilt. I sought out the dark for more spectres of being, and found that Zoe was staring at me.

I thought that was strange.

‘Where’s Adam?’

‘He’s gone back to the house for more wood. This fire needs building up.’

Perhaps it did. But the night was long; we were worn from drink and a lazy day spent out in the sea-rich air. Pete had discovered the tips of Claire’s toes, but he was too tired to tickle them and she was too weary to laugh. Coop and Lizzie had fallen mute; they stared at a feast of fanciful figures which leapt about the fainting inferno, dying, fading, falling.

Bill snored.

Zoe was bored. Adam had gone too long for her liking, and now I could see she was listening intently, awaiting his coming, half-thinking to stand, to climb up the path and seek him herself. She was gazing through the thin crystal air at a shrouded moon which hung in the dark: she was searching with her ears not her eyes.

It was she who heard the noise first. It was she who rose and made us aware of the figure which stood at the top of the cliff.

I turned to follow her pointing hand, discerning an indistinct shadow in motion: the image of Adam wrapped around the skeletal frame of a tree. He was wrestling with the limbs of his trophy, hauling it right to the edge.

He swayed and laughed, he was shouting something – he much drunker than us all – fuelled by the rage of the day.

Then he threw his prize from the cliff. And down it came at a ghastly speed, tumbling, spiraling, giddy with motion, screaming, unstoppable with the weight.

Irresistible.

Immediately I guessed it to be the broken half of the Judas tree, and I cursed him for it. But it wasn't until the trunk came down, till it splintered on the brutal rocks, till I heard a satisfied sigh from Tom – till I witnessed the wood, the rock and Tom's head caught together and meeting as one – that I noticed the wealth of purple-pink blossom, bright in the glaze of the fire.

Bristol

Nature Rambler

Will charged ahead of me and got there first. Two thousand and nine feet of rugged ascent at more than forty five degrees.

By the time I scratched my way to the saddle, the fierce sun which had burnt my back on the pitiless climb had been obscured by cold moist mist, chilling the sweat on my neck and my arms, wrapping the summit within its folds, concealing the valley below.

As though born of the rock, Will sat alone, grinning his glory, embraced in the pleat of the unpleasant cloud. On the miserable crags which loomed above us, perched like proud vultures amidst the mist, two foreign tourists warbled a torrent of harsh, unmeaningful words.

Craning over the windless side, I could see our three companions curling and crawling round huge heather divots, scraping and stumbling uphill. Beyond them a pair of panting old ladies, and further down a group of boys cajoling themselves up the slope.

I crouched by Will's side in a bite in the rock, my skin coarse with peat and the smell of my sweat, watching the three as they crept to the saddle, wheezing and gasping the freezing air, then lying spread-eagled out on the ground, insensible with fatigue.

We passed the bottle of water between us, and the chocolate biscuits I had in my sack. Then we studied the fog as we sat together, guessing where lochs and mountains might be, comparing the wall of white to the map, aiming the compass at banks of mist in an effort to

chart where we were. Pockets of land appeared beneath us, islands constructed from gaps in the clouds – isolated in space and in time – then swallowed up by belligerent skies before we could train the binoculars on them, before we could use them to fathom our bearing and plot our way down to the foot.

In the car homeward, sore and exhausted, as the cloud was dispersed by the wind and the sun, Will recreated the climb in his words. For him, it was not the hike that he liked. It was the challenge, the companionship, and the view.

Which in our case, of course, had been missing.

Tired, aching, hungry, and cold, shared empathy eluded me. I took comfort instead in the thought of the pub, and thawing myself by a fire.

We had a couple of rounds of beer. Will continued to eulogise about the scene that stood in the window – the hill from which we had just descended, and to its side a sliver of sea. I guess he could see it better than me from where he sat at the end of the bench. He painted a miniature picture in oils while I ate a glorious scampi and chips, washed down with a slice of blueberry pie.

The wind had calmed when we left the pub; it had died by the time we reached the tents. I walked to the fringe of the sea with my rod, and caught three fish in two hours. I was roasting them over the fire for supper when Will returned from a gentler trek – to the ridge of the hill behind. The view from the crest, he said, was superb. The islands stood proud from the mantle of blue, and Skye's peaks pierced the sharp horizon, cutting into the

evening air. I looked beyond where I caught my fish to those indistinct grey-green lumps of rock which brooded at the end of all sight. Stunning, no doubt, from the top, I thought, as I crunched my fish with Will.

Then, to my shame, I fell asleep. I woke to find that the day had closed – clothing the sky in mystery, in the boundless, unbroken shroud of night. My friends had all been drawn round a fire, and were staring at the bewitching flame. When the blaze died down and buckled to ember they made their way to their tents in pairs, well-feasted on the fabulous day.

I stayed in the darkness, reading a book by the light of the fire, not ready for sleep. The beam of a torch shone out from Will's tent, breaking the solid mantle of pitch; a scatter of voices was lost against the smooth palpitations of waves. Perhaps he was staring at Sally's navel, finding an intimate beauty in that. Perhaps he was painting it.

I took a bowl of dirty plates down the slope to the idle sea. The rocks were strewn with locks of weed, still wet as the tide imperceptibly ebbed to the silent spell of the moon. I stepped through soft puddles of lazy shadow, avoiding the filmy voids of pools, and crept to the water's edge.

The sea bubbled furtively round my ankles, sucking and sighing as it came to the boil. Crouched in the blackness, I soaped and scrubbed dishes; I drained the pots on the rocks.

The stars seemed unnaturally bright and true, reflecting cool eyes on the face of the water, sliding and nudging against the stones. I imagined countless fish in the sea,

suspended in its shadowy pool, gaping at those spots of light, wondering what they might be.

Will's islands were captured in silhouette. Skye was absorbed in the blanket of night, hiding its monstrous hills till the day brought them back to a semblance of life.

Would he think what I saw was beautiful now? I have no doubt that he would. But how could its beauty be so elusive? What made it the thing that it was? The distant moon was a dirty-white; the cliff fell shapelessly into the sea; the waves were a sound which shifted restless, bringing no music to me.

Tails of light glanced off the pots as I gathered them up and picked my way back over the shore and up the slope. Will's light was extinguished; the air was still. The spectral tents seemed fused to the earth. I went to my own and crawled through its flap, closing the entrance behind me.

The sound of the fastening tore through the night, painfully loud, as I closed myself in. I lay on my back in the sheltering tent, beneath its skin which concealed the sky. I tried to relax: to welcome sleep. But sleep was slow to come. Instead, I lay in the darkness, awake. I could hear the breeze as it shivered the canvas; I could hear the sigh of the yawning sea; I could feel the heather crackle beneath me. I could see, embedded within the lining, the press, the insistent shadow of stars.

Summer Isles

This and That

Act One

In the beginning there was this and that.

Act Two

This. The definite. The immediate. The ubiquitous. The thing – of all things – caught in focus, here, in the infinite now. The potent; the centre stage; the lure. The light in dark; the life midst death. The reason; the purpose; the one that is – the one from countless that are not. Alive. All-consuming; all-absorbing. For all to feast their senses on. The unique; the matchless; the divine. Caught in a hand, in a galaxy. Captured in the blink of an eye, in a fleeting glance. The essence of eternity. The one that is; the only one; the one that has to be. The inexorable; the inevitable. The body, the being, the breath. Of many, one. Not next, nor then, nor there – but singular, spectacular, and of the present. Now! Behold its sheer immediacy. Be humble and admire!

That. The other. The also. The one that is not; the one beyond. Not here, but there. Distanced, divorced. Unloved, rejected, scorned, betrayed. The lesser, the inferior. Of two, the runner up. Contemptuous competitor that dares to vie on even terms – that fails at every turn. The fallible, the deficient, the defective and defeated one. The far removed, the indistinct, the almost totally obscure. Emasculated, lame, infertile. The one that from the others rises – not to shine, but there to shame. Exposed within comparison, and riddled with disease.

Ridiculous. Shudder if you dare to speak it; take care if you point it out. Protect your children from it. Kick it. Annexed, atrophied, and alien. Revile it and despise!

Act Three

His. Belonging to Him, the Chief, the Head Honcho, the Great One, the Lord of all Lords. Of the king, the ruler, the omnipotent one. He who wields authority, who radiates his majesty, who exudes a pure divinity. That of the man; the one that came first; the sober, the upright, the just. The one laid low by the wiles and whims of she who was made from a rib. Possessed by he, the hunter, protector, confessor, and lead. The sword, and the shield. The strength of the nations; the shaper of fate. Of him whose seed brought forth the babe; whose gentle hands calm its unrest. Of him who wrestles with bears and wolves; who kills to feed and to defend. The property of him, the galactic ruler, the king of the castle, the absolute master of all. Of he, who inherits and distributes largesse, who earns and who pays, who sows and who reaps. Law-maker; lawn-raker; risk-taker; heart-breaker. Dependable, honest, modest man. Be humble and admire!

Hat. A covering for heads. Cloth, fur, paper, crepe. Rubber, plastic, tweed. Floral, fruited, feathered, tarred. For rain, for shine, for vanity. For show, disguise, revenge. For fun. For ugly faces, bald spots, boils. For now, but never forever. Worn by him whose lineage breeds manners, dress sense, etiquette. Worn by she who would contend with every other of her race from weddings through to Ladies Day – the more extravagant the greater prized this foolish frippery. Over-priced and

underused. Nit-hiding, flea-catching, germ-spreading hive. A silly bit of stuffing slapped upon a head and carried hence. Revile it and despise!

Act Four

Is. The being, the breath, the certainty of having life. Existing in the glorious now, prevailing evermore. The actualized; the realised. Precise and total harmony. The definite, the has to be. The ultimate, objective fact. Beyond all doubt, and uncontested. The single essence of creation – sure, alive and beyond censure. Ineluctable, and pure. The sheer and utter affirmation. The truth, the indisputable: complete within itself. The thing beyond all time and space, that yet compresses both in one. Synchronised with everything contained within our universe. Two letters rubbed against themselves to spell all meaning back to man, and show him what we are. A pocket of eternity wrapped up within the now. Be humble and admire!

At. A single point in space and time. A thing that's lost as soon as found, or one which narrows boundlessness into a pinhead. A pox upon infinity that mocks it with myopic ties. A place we'd rather be without – that being there we lose all care, and ache to be away. Defined less by the fact that is, and more by when and where is not – that greater purpose or design from which we are denied. A sorry island, lost and lonely. Shackled, and beyond escape. A passive state of hopelessness for never being more. A fleeting presence; an occurrence. A function of a bigger goal. A fraction in a fractured universe. Revile it and despise!

Act Five

S comes before **T**.

Cairo

The Millstone

Can't sleep again.

Just feel it all going round in my head. Holding on to all that I have because that is what I have always been taught. A duty defying both logic and self. A drowning man who clings to a millstone for not wanting to lose what he has.

Ignorance we can always forgive, but never stupidity. We both agreed on that point. So clasp onto something that drowns me is nothing but folly – it is idle and vain. Duty might whisper into my ear that what I hold onto has purpose and value, yet from the weight I feel in my hands I sense what I cling to has nothing to give – nothing but heartache and hurt.

I look around me, and a voice in my ear – a voice that resembles the sound of my own – persuades me I ought to be happy. I have all the features a person could list – all I should need to lead to contentment – laid out and ready before me. Small consolation the constituents bring, when I know in my heart I am not.

There is no should to feeling fulfilled – to being at ease or finding my peace. Either it's there or it's not. Maybe not as an absolute, but to a degree that can satisfy me, up to a stage I can live and enjoy – removed from a sense of this gradual closure, where my only hope is a miracle that will come and fix what is wrong.

For there are no miracles. There is only the millstone I hold in my arms. Only that, and no more.

The stone is so large, and its bulk is so dense, I find it hard to let go. It has grown so much of a burden to me – it cripples my life so surely and sorely – it has come to define who I am.

There is comfort, maybe, to things that are known – such comfort that we can endure any pain. Without question, without recognition. I tell myself my millstone has use, if not now then at some point to come. Though I cannot move because of its mass, the water around me is not so deep that I am not be able to gasp at air by pushing my nose through the liquid surface, and breathing my freedom, from time to time.

That is another illusion. There are no miracles to be had in this world, but people may do significant things if they dare to reach out and seize what they want, if they are sure of themselves, and are brave. Yet, when clutching on to the mass of a millstone, whether drowning or standing alone in a field, there is nothing momentous to me.

I stand in my field like an idle fool, and people come and people go. They look at me; they think I am happy. For what fool would stand in a field like that – who would submit of their own volition – if they had not chosen to do so? And I know myself to be such a fool that as they pass I force a smile, or turn my head to hide my shame.

I have tried to reason with my stone. Not often, but occasionally. I ask it not to be so compact – not quite so burdensome to me. I ask if I might put it down. Not for the purpose of running away, but merely to relieve my arms of the tension, with a promise to pick it up soon.

But you cannot reason with stone.

Then, one day, I looked up. I looked and saw you were standing there. You noticed me; you reached out your arm; you traced my face with your eyes. Then you looked at my hands and you saw what was in them: you saw what I held, and you knew. And that was the miracle I was awaiting, though everyone knows that miracles are not a part of this world.

That was my miracle. And though I knew it was all I desired, I recoiled and retreated from you. I turned away; I turned my back; I turned to embrace the stone that I held, knowing it solid and certain. I pretended to polish the thing in my hands. Though I knew what I did would offer me nothing, and all it would give you was pain.

Then why did I do it?

I told myself there is comfort in stone, comfort in that which is wrapped in my arms, if only because it is known. Whereas holding you would be something new – something I knew was unknown. I would have to learn a new way of living; to live believing again.

And what if some day you should leave? Then I would be left holding nothing. Not even a stone. I would stand in my field quite alone, on my own. And it is that that terrifies me. That, not desire, not obligation, which would make me follow my cherished stone if ever it happened to roll away. Because I dare not be alone. Rather than nothing, I would choose the company of a stone. It is so massive and so inert it's unlikely to slip away from my clutch; it will stay here shackled around me forever. That is my consolation. Enough to forgo all else that might be. Enough to reject all miracles. Enough for me to recoil from your sight; to shield my eyes from the light.

I looked up one day, and there you were. You were standing there before me.

So what did I do?

I turned my back, and I polished my stone, for that was the only thing I knew.

Then, when I turned again, you were gone. For no one would stand there forever, in wait.

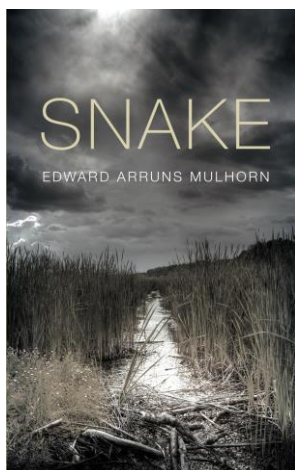
It was only then, when the magic had died, that I saw myself in a barren field. Standing on my own with a stone.

Not with you. Not with anyone. Just alone with a stone.

And I howled

London

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.

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