

The Field

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As children we rarely agreed about anything but our feelings about the field were unanimous. It may have been the massive standing stone which stood in stern solitude in the head rig. Enigmatic, impassive, its peak white with bird slime and its ancient hollows encrusted with lichen, it seemed to watch over the field like a sentinel placed by pagan priests centuries before our time. Children had been sacrificed there, we decided, and their blood still stained the soil. A fable, perhaps, but one that haunted the shadows of our room at night and lingered in daylight visits to the place.

To our father the field cast a shadow over the rest of the farm as it grew only rashes and bracken. He often muttered about it at the table as he peeled the skin from his potatoes, promising that one day he would break it in, plough the rashes and sow corn. He must have wondered why we glanced nervously at each other when he mentioned it. We were sure that the intrusion would bring bad luck on the house. We never spoke about our fears, even to our Mam, it being one of those secrets that we kept from adults, knowing that they would scoff at it.

A small man, our father, with bow legs and a limp left by a kick from a stallion, the reason, no doubt, for his attachment to his tractor. He rarely walked unless he had to. In spite of the impediment, he had taken on a neglected farm and fought to rescue it from dereliction. And it was a relentless battle, a colossal task which would have deterred a man with less determination, but he had a vision, a picture of green slopes where there was only bracken, of hay where there was moss and rashes, of corn where there had been no harvest for a hundred years. His solitary struggle with the land pervaded every hour of the day, infected every decision. When he sold the calves, we

hoped for a car; he bought a crawler tractor. Still, we never wanted for food or clothes and soon he had transformed every acre within the hill dyke except the field of the stone.

Eventually he tackled it. It was a cold winter's morning with ice in the horse trough. I must have been about ten at the time. He loaded the great heart-shaped rutting spade and the other draining tools into the cart and, hoisting me over the tailgate, set off for the field. A wooden cart, built originally for horses, he had fitted a towbar and an axle with rubber wheels. It bounced over the cobbles, jarring my thin buttocks and rattling the tools. I pressed my back into the corner and stretched my arms over the sides. The discomfort did not matter. I was being taken to work. Just him and me. I was delighted. I could see him in the cab, his pipe in the corner of his mouth, the greasy rim of his cap forming a wrinkle in the back of his neck and his fists gripping the wheel. A rush of affection for the small figure made me blush in the cold air. Had I been a knight, I would have sworn loyalty to him and vowed to protect him from all harm. That's how I felt yet, at the same time, I was embarrassed. Affection for my Mam would not have felt awkward but its intrusion into the space between myself and my father was curiously uncomfortable.

The tractor stopped at the field, and I leapt out to open the gate. Turning my back to the stone, I concentrated on the ribbed tyres of the tractor. As the cart passed, I shut the gate and followed the tractor to the lowest hollow of the field next to the burn. By the time I reached him my father had unloaded the tools. The place was strangely silent after the diesel engine choked to a halt. Sheep muttering in the distance; a curlew calling over the moss. No other sound.

"We'll start here," he said, his voice rough with pipe spittle, "Somewhere here, in the middle of the hollow. I bet there's a choked drain here. Somewhere under the rashes. What do you think, eh?"

"Aye," I nodded, startled at being consulted.

“Aye,” he mirrored my nod. When he smiled, his mouth turned down at the corners and his blue eyes grinned. He was watching me as he might watch a pup, waiting to see what silly tricks it would perform. I tried to guess what I was supposed to do. Uncertain, I stood and chewed my lip.

“Right, then,” he coughed after a while, “You get the spade.”

He hoisted the rutter and the hawk on to his shoulder and limped into the hollow next to the burn.

Using the rutter, he cut two parallel lines about half a chain long through the rashes. The great heart-shaped blade, as sharp as a scythe, sliced through the soil easily. I wondered what it would do to my foot and imagined it cutting neatly through the flesh like a scalpel. I winced spontaneously and glanced in his direction in case he had noticed. He was absorbed in his task. He wielded the spade with consummate skill, his powerful hands gripping the horizontal handle like a weight-lifter. One day, I promised myself, I will do that.

He stood between the lines that he had cut and started to make slices across. Bog myrtle, crushed by his boots, flavoured the air with the pungent scent of mint. It reminded me of humid harvests when, binding sheaves behind his scythe, we crushed the myrtle leaves to fend off the flies. Summer seemed so far away. I thought of the sheaves, baked in the sun, rattling as they landed on the trailer, the rich smell of straw and the huge blue sky that stretched above me as I lay on my back on top of the swaying load. It was safe there, sinking into the soft sheaves in the sunlight. A castle of my own, lofty and impregnable.

“Now,” he said, “You take the hawk and, when I push the clod forward with the blade, stick the hawk in and lift the clod out. Right ?”

“The hawk ?”

“Aye, that thing there,” he said impatiently, pointing to a three-pronged fork with its tines at a right-angle to the shaft. I lifted it and held it in my hands, trying to remember how to use it properly.

He lifted the rutter high above shoulders and drove it into the soil, pushed the handle forward, then hauled it back.

“Now !” he wheezed, as the blade lifted the clod.

I flung the prongs into the turf and pulled. It came away so easily, I fell back, landing on the sodden ground. He frowned, clearly irritated by my poor attempt.

“Swing it round, boy, so that it lands behind you. Like this.”

He dropped the rutter and demonstrated.

“Swing it round. See they land in a row. With the grass on top. Try again.”

I did manage to get the knack of it – not well but good enough to satisfy him – and gradually a new drain appeared, its sides cut clean and weeping a stream of dark water.

“Hold on now,” he said after we had cleared a few yards, “Get us the spade, the wee spade.”

“God’s sake,” I thought, “You could get it yourself” but I did not dare to utter the words. I retrieved it from the cart and handed it to him.

I glanced up at the stone. A hoodie crow had perched on the top and was croaking resentfully, dipping its head with every squawk. I hated the hoodies. I had seen them pluck the eyes out of weak lambs.

“What did I tell you ?” my father shouted. Startled I turned round, expecting to see him scowling. Instead, he was grinning triumphantly and pointing into the drain. There it was. The end of an orange tile, protruding from the depths of the drain like a stallion’s dangle and spurting rusty water.

“Old tile drain,” he cooed, “Choked and buried all these years. The man who laid that won’t be bothered by a sore head where he is. Dead and buried long ago.”

I thought of an old man in hodden grey with long, silver hair and broken teeth, his threaded eyes glancing nervously at the stone. No science to explain the famines that swept the land then.

My father returned to his digging and I continued to imagine the people who worked the field long ago. Day-dreaming, my father called it.

Suddenly he stopped and leapt out of the drain, his eyes dark with horror.

“Home, boy. Quick,” he hissed urgently.

“But it’s ...”

“Home. Now !” he shouted, limping hurriedly towards the tractor.

“The tools ...”

“Never mind the bloody tools. Come on.”

I had never seen him in such a state. Panic, alarm, his lower jaw set strangely forward, like a Neanderthal. We hurried back to the farm, leaving the tools lying where they were dropped.

He did not return to the field the following day and I did not dare to mention it. I lay awake at night, trying to work out what might have caused his flight from the field. Had he remembered something vital back at the farm ? Had he seen something that I had missed ? A raging bull in the next field ? The ghost of a Druid near the stone, a blood-stained flint knife in its hand ? It was an evil place after all. Yet I wanted to go back. In spite of the fear. I had to find out.

Three days passed. The travelling mill was due the next day to thrash our corn stacks and I knew that I could not escape after its arrival. Borrowing my Mam’s old bike, I sneaked away to the field. The tools lay where we had left them. I hid the bike behind the hedge and climbed the gate. It creaked under my weight and I looked around, worried that someone might have heard. Nothing moved. I stepped down and listened. Silence. Only the thudding under my vest. I looked up at the stone. It stared back at me impassively, its dark shadow slithering through the stubble. A cold, evil place. Good sense told me to flee, to abandon the quest, but curiosity nudged me forward, scoffing at my timidity.

I crept over to the drain and peered in nervously. Nothing strange. The orange tile was spurting a stream of clear water. I moved up slowly, examining the spade-

marks. It was in the last one. There, deep in the soil. I gasped and stepped back, covering my mouth. A dog's head, partly decomposed. The yellow teeth bared in a snarl, the last shreds of the muzzle under the jaw. Scraps of hair still clinging to the empty eye sockets, the crown smooth and naked like a soup bone. I turned and ran from the field.

A horrible sight. Why had he fled from it ? I had watched him bury ewes, their bellies green and swollen with foul gas. I had seen him slough the stinking wool off them with his hands and had run off when he burst the carcass with his spade. I had seen him pluck long-dead lambs from their mothers, piece by rotting piece, the small corpse disintegrating in his fingers. He could clear the sewer with his hands without gagging. A dog's head, however decomposed, should not have upset him. I wanted to know but could not ask.

It was the old shepherd who gave me the answer. I met him in the bull park one afternoon, his grey eyes studying critically the black furrows of my father's ploughing. He was tall, so tall that he seemed to grow out of his clothes as I watched, leaving his trousers an inch above his ankles and his sleeves short of his wrists. Tall and gaunt, he stood like a stricken tree, swaying slightly in the cold wind. His tattered ears, translucent like parchment, bent perceptibly in the stronger gusts as though, because of his height, he had to listen more intently. I told him about the dog. I had often told him things which I did not tell the others, and he had never betrayed the trust.

He gazed at me for a while as if he was perplexed.

"It's Sweep," he said eventually with a deep sigh.

"My Sweep ?"

He nodded.

"But he took Sweep to the vet. He had him put down."

Sweep had been my dog. He went everywhere with me. I talked to him and he listened, his head tilted to one side and his eyes fixed on mine. I had planned to run him in the trials one day but he started to worry sheep. I did everything I could to keep him

in the close or on a string but he always escaped and, when he did, he killed. There was nothing else for it.

“Na, na,” the old man shook his head, “He drowned him in the dipper.”

“What ?” I shouted, my voice squeaking with shock and fury.

“I buried him. He gave me the job. Near the standing stone. I never thought he would plough there.”

“The bastard !” I screamed, hammering the furrows with my stick.

“Don’t tell him I told you.”

I marched away to hide my tears, still beating the ground as if it was my father’s back.

I planned revenge - poisoning the land with sheep dip, feeding the pigs with mouldy barley, shaking sugar into the farm diesel, polluting the milk. I did nothing. I smothered the anger and it smouldered like a heath fire deep in the peat. To add to the rage, my father eventually returned to the field and, after it was drained, it produced a crop of corn that the whole village admired. I never forgave him, though, and the chasm between us widened and was never bridged.

As I stand here, overlooking the field, my grandson’s hand warm in my fingers, I take no pleasure in its return to wilderness. I am even glad that my father is not here to see it. The hollows sprout rashes over the choked drains and a russet tangle of bracken covers the hummocks. I pass my hand over my eyes to dismiss the image of him tossing aside the rutter and remember instead Sweep, his half-cocked ears and his eager eyes. My dog.

The stone casts a shadow over his grave.