

*The Grassic Gibbon Centre  
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Earth Underfoot

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Tomorrow, they were to emigrate. He overheard it as he overheard many things—fleeting, in passing, never quite listening. He was a small, quick child in a hot, languid Earth. He ran, played, crawled-- inside or outside, on tiles or in grass, in cool, palm-tree shade or in brilliant sun.

Adults could mutter: that was what they did. He knew words, but not meanings, and he cared nothing for meanings. He had no time. He cared about *living*, he cared about the terror and the speed and the thrill. Words were too slow, were not worth the time spent saying them: only adventure mattered, and with adventure came risk, came injury.

He was always filthy. His mother would shake her head, seeing him sneaking in the doorway at the slow dip of lilac night, witness to his crimson scrapes, his lurid bruises, the dirt on his skin. The water in the shower ran brown when she washed him. Her hands, reddened from their own work, pushed soap between his fingers and toes, and into the small crescents of his nails, the scent rising beautifully in the steam. A golden light would stream through the windows of the bathroom, from the setting sun. He remembered it later: a watery honey light, flecked with the iridescent vapour, and flecks of dust that he never quite saw for what they were at the time.

As with words, so with objects. Much escaped him. He *saw* it all— things were seen, categorized, registered, but seldom recalled and never were they dwelled on. As a child, he never *understood*. He thought nothing of the rotten wood peeling from the window frames in splinters, or the creeping, mottled damp in the bedroom ceilings. He never noticed the sheaves of paperwork gathering at his father's feet, or the man's newly resolute posture, which became more akin to that of a soldier entering a war. He never truly perceived the dismantling of his mother's rooms. He *watched* her wrapping the valuables – the cotton, the quilts, the pottery; the fine ceramic ornaments and crystalline glass. He *watched* her place them into large boxes, her eyes dull, her mouth a thin, fixed line. But the meaning behind the action remained as elusive to him as the complicated definitions of the words they spoke.

Nevertheless, the changes taking place had an effect on him, if only subconsciously. One morning, the draining of his mother's dark eyes triggered an awakening in him. He could see her still, progressing down the curving stone stairs of their home—the shadows of the night still lingered in the hollows of her cheeks, and she seemed such a stranger to him in that moment that the question pierced through to his normal stream of thoughts. His mother looked tired, looked sad: *why?*

After this, his young eyes wandered less and focused more. Though no less naïve, the intensity with which he noticed his surroundings grew. He explored now in a series of small, feverish obsessions. In particular, dirt was, to him, no longer some arbitrary fact of life, it became something to be grasped at, held on to. Daily, he would take handfuls of it— dark, rich garden soil from the bed below the fading roses-- and he would rub his palms together. He tried to feel the weight and the colour of the clay in his hands. He would examine them in the moments after, and marvel at the way the earth took up residence in every hatch of his skin, every notch, every fingerprint whorl.

The overwhelming preoccupation of this particular day was ants. They were relentless, and he was seeking them out, peering at them, wherever they could be found.

Here, on the whitewash, ants with leaves on their backs climbed the wall in thin rivulets; over there, ants crossed the ochre tiles erratically, swarming over a dead wasp. On the hot pavement leading to the village church, ants wandered speedily, ready to be prodded with sticks. Indoors, ants were to be swatted, and at doorways and windowsills they were to be held at bay with white dust taken from emerald bottles. He found himself by the cypresses that flanked the gate. He trailed one ant with his finger. Where did they climb to, on this hard bark? Had he ever seen the same insect twice?

With the other children that year, he had stepped on them with glee. Once, they had each drawn circles on the ground in chalk, and played a game where the person with the most crushed ants in their area by tea-time would win. Their shoulders, the nape of their necks, grew brown in the beating sun, and their throats became hoarse with their howling encouragements as they scooped the scrambling, relentless insects into their midst for the slaughter.

Today, he felt no urge to kill them. Instead, an inexplicable sadness grew in his heart, and his hand dropped to his side.

At once, his mother took it up in her own.

She told him they were going up the mountain, and gave him his boots. The sun was now high and hot— waves of heat rolled off the car rooftop, and when he took his mother's palm, he felt it sticky. One tendril of hair clung to her forehead in the shape of a question mark. Glad of this opportunity to abandon his study of the ants given his sudden regrets, he agreed, though it wasn't so much an invitation as a command.

It was a short walk along the dusty and quiet road followed by a short climb, the nature of which was more of a hill than a mountain. What it lacked in height, it earned in steepness: tall rock walls jutted into the blue sky vertically and wove laterally for miles, forming a dense

network of narrow valleys and toothy uplands. Surely and unconsciously, his mother led him, making pretty and light conversation as she navigated the rocky notches and surges. It was the land she was born to; nevertheless, there was a strain in her shoulders.

Limestone rubble at the foot of the climb was saturated with sharp, desiccated vegetation and after a while his shins and kneecaps were scraped to bleeding point, his palms puckered with thorns. Upon hearing his miserable sniffs his mother would halt their ascent and carefully nurse him until they could proceed, so progress was slow. The village retreated at their back. Sometimes, a clutch at a low shrub for stability would release a heady scent into the air that made him want to burrow his fingers into the ground again and stay there to breathe it in as long as he could, but to his distress, the aromas— which he learned later were of wild herbs, of thyme and lavender and sage— faded with the next breeze, and the dusty calves and elbows of his mother reminded him to move onwards, relentlessly, to the summit.

An electricity pylon stood at the highest point of the ridge, and hummed its greedy static into the sky. Beyond, and as far as he could tell, terraced uplands dominated the view to the horizon. Ruins of old houses, too, stood scattered across the vista, linked by thread-like trails. The rafters of the house nearest to them were visible, a white half-skeleton exposed against the olive groves and the fleshy brown soil. That people had lived here once, he had not known. He had not thought much had existed beyond the confines of the valley and the undulating farmland to the south, the road through which led to the city and the brilliant blue sea. This view was new to him, and he drank it in as he had not his father's paperwork, and the boxes in the hallways. He looked at it in order to see what lay behind it, the same way he had learned to see the gathering sorrow in his mothers' eyes.

He looked at her. For all his new insight, he could not understand why she had taken him there, and why she looked at him so expectantly now that they had arrived at their destination. At last, perhaps satisfied by what she saw in his expression and perhaps not, she turned from him and threw down a shawl onto a bare patch of ground. They had climbed for over an hour;

but the heat was waning.

A warm breeze shuddered through the dry, scrubby grass. With a thin line of strain between her eyebrows, his mother reached out to him. He sat between her knees, facing the way she faced. They overlooked their valley, and the road that drew through it like a knife cut. The winding spool of tar seemed unending, invisible at either side owing to the interruptions of trees and rock, and houses with russet, crenelated roofs. *His* house lay there, with rusted mesh over the windows to stop the mosquitos and a creaking gate that moaned at night alongside the cicadas. Somewhere below him, right at that moment, ants were wandering over the outside walls, beneath the salmon-coloured roses, between diamond trellises of white bougainvillea.

His mother hugged him close until the sweet scent of her hair enveloped him. Reaching into her bag, she produced an orange, which she began to peel. In one long strip she managed it and split the flesh carefully, so the segments would separate without spilling much of their juice. She offered half to him and he accepted, finding the soft fruit sweet, and warmed by the heat of the sun.

*'Mañana, salimos de aquí,'* she murmured against his ear.

*Tomorrow, we leave here.*

And she pulled him a little closer.

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Tomorrow, he was to emigrate. Leaving the farmhouse that afternoon, a peculiar emotion settled upon him once more, as it had done for weeks. He hated it, and and yet it was familiar

to him as though he was a sheep following a well-worn path in the hills.

He stood in the barn again. Whitewash and rust it was, oil and muck, canisters fashioned from all sorts of household detritus— cans of dried paint, empty mint tins and aluminium pots of baby food long since eaten. They held spanners and hammers and screwdrivers, nuts and bolts and nails, and things that he didn't recognise and had never seen used. The far away edges of the roof beams were powdery with cobwebs and dust, and the old cabinets fastened haphazardly to the walls were filled with the books that had been banished from the house— books about the breeding of Clydesdales and the rearing of bullocks and heifers. A bird's nest nestled into one ceiling nook dripped straw and soft white dirt onto the barren floor. He stared at it awhile, imagining the soft tweeting that must come from it at night when the rain fell in the courtyard behind him.

The air was dry and heavy with an oily smell that went straight to his bones. He shivered in the doorway, upset. A man grown, yet he felt his father bearing down on him from all sides— his father, and his father's father, and his father's father's father— all the way back until he could see no more deeply into history. He saw them, standing still, silent as the grave in their flat caps and rolled up shirtsleeves. It was like one of those necklaces they'd found in the peat glens farther north: each generation like an amber bead on its thread, another layer looking at him. Transfixed upon him. Judging him.

They were shapes, formed of the ages. They were carved from the hefty stone that made up the solemn hills, and the reticent ground at his feet.

Here they looked at him and said: *a traitor in our midst.*

*A foreigner.*

The word unsettled him, but he felt its truth, and its falsehood. Odd that being *in* a place,

even for most of your life, did not mean you belonged to it. Being *part* of the place...he felt that that was the difference. It was surely possible to be a part of many places in the same way an object can belong to any room, the way a bird may live in and take flight from any tree. His sun-struck youth would have no superior claim on him than would the time he had spent here on this farm. Nor would the more recent years he had spent in Glasgow's grid-patterned labyrinth... was that not the case?

Perhaps there was more to it than that, but he could not think of what.

Unconsciously, he found himself reaching out towards an old saddle that had lain unused for decades. He touched the soft leather as though the animal still held it and could tremble under his fingertips. He could nearly sense the slow rise and fall of its hefty back, see the shuttering eyelids, the flickering tail.

Memories of the city drew away from him. He had been there only last week-- the visit to the farm was fleeting-- but the fields of blocky concrete and the relentless drumbeats of traffic and people appeared as a motion image viewed from behind a far pane of glass. He saw himself among the minimised, restless crowd. There he was: rucksack on his back. Erratic. Quick. Clean. Life was thrilling—wasn't it thrilling? There he was: sitting in a railway carriage with his legs spread and his hands in his hoodie, his headphones clamped to his head, his knee pressed into the woman beside him. He recognised his eyes from afar, as blank and empty as the receipt crushed in his pocket. There he had been: thinking about the night before. Thinking about the night ahead. A poke of lager at his feet, maybe. A few pills in his shoe.

*Aye*, he thought, with weariness. He had to get away.

He touched the wall next; it peeled away below him in thin flakes.

He would get away and begin again, and all the conflict within him would finally rest.

He traced a hand across the thin glass of the old cabinet. He took a handful of nails and rolled them across his palm. Pulling a book from its position, he fanned the pages and let them run over his thumb. It felt like cool water, it smelled like eighty years.

Ancient saws hung from hooks in the wall that rattled in widened holes— their surface was peppery, choked with rust. Rough and wizened. Like old relations, he thought with a smile: there was a great aunt, her teeth blunted with time, her back warped, handle cracked. There was his grandfather with his battered, sharp end; dots of speckled black across the edge. One of the newer ones hung from a blue handle, its blade shining duller than it had when it was bought, its jagged edge relentless but for the dent that broke its line midway. That one was his father.

A butterfly wing lay preserved atop the old radio with its broken tape deck. Assigning characters to objects, it might be childish—but he could humour himself. Who was that? It represented someone, he knew. The thought caught his mind like a spider would catch a new surface on its silk: lightly, but solidly.

Not a butterfly from the rough moor and driftwood-strewn beaches of here; he could see the faded orange scoop along its edge. This insect had been too vivid for pewter skies, where the wind tore, and the rain lashed its grey whip at you until you could do nowt but buckle.

He thought of her. The hill-top, a sweet fruit.

*‘Mañana salimos de aquí.’*

True in one sense, and not in another. They would leave— his father, himself— but she would remain.



Time had passed, many years. He knew now the burning sadness he had recognised in her; he knew the bleakness of feeling which had left ash in her eyes. He was feeling it now. He pulled away from the butterfly wing, that dead *mariposa*. He left the barn and in the open air again he hurried to the farmhouse across the concrete that split at his heels, ducking his head against the smirring rain. The sycamore tree creaked above him and above the slate roofs, below the grey sky.

The sun he had been born in haunted him, the sun which had made his skin brown.

Tomorrow, he was to emigrate.