



Mountain Writing Competition 2024

2nd Prize: Prose

All Alone? by Iain Cumming

The Highlands are beautiful from below, but their sheer majesty can only be comprehended from their peaks. The day had begun in the darkness of Glen Torridon, but as I entered Coire an Laoigh a white world had gradually come to life under the first light of morning. Spidean Coire nan Clach had been my aim, but the day was so alluring that I had carried on to Ruadh Stac Mòr, the second Munro. On its summit I stood, the view to the north casting a delightful spell.

Wester Ross, my home, and the envy of fellow walkers. I travelled all night for this. You actually live here?! The glens a sea of mist. Towering out of them, the distinctive peaks glimmering in the low sun. The speared Slioch, the mighty remote Fisherfields and the bladed forge of An Teallach. My shadow, like a flagpole, stretched before me. New Year's Day on Beinn Eighe. Seclusion the best of companions. An opportunity to exhale the daily grind. To inhale life as it should be. To rise above. A king for a day.

Into the picture a raven flew, breaking the panorama's hypnosis. The slight anxiety that I had felt on the traverse between the two peaks resurfaced. Ahead lay a race against nightfall to reach the car first. Fuel first though; coffee and biscuits. And then a final glance north before retreating.

But, as if someone had turned the light down, the vista had changed. Looking round to the south, threatening clouds were building. Snow and gales were on the MWIS forecast but not expected until well into the night. I hurriedly returned along the ridge. The sensible course of action was to abandon the high ground and to descend far down to the relative shelter of Coire MhicFhearchair.

Halfway down the scree chute, the wind rose and the first flakes began to drive. Even in winter gear the air felt insidiously cold. Nothing but grey now; my world enclosed between the low sky, the encroaching horizon, and the deepening crunching snow. The day like a declining man who would not fulfil his years. I glanced at my phone but, as I expected, there was no signal in these parts. I attempted to block out the thought of the emergency beacon that had still not been delivered. I tried to calm my mind that was pacing a few steps ahead. Wasn't my winter mountaineering experience an insurance policy? Wasn't each step carrying me closer to the security of the glen?

But it's impossible to rein in your mind when danger lies like a shadow ahead and follows close behind. The gusts didn't travel alone, their echoes crying from the high buttresses of the encircling corrie. A shriek calling in the wind, a nameless voice seeking me out. I was being hunted. Seclusion was now my enemy. The kingdom had risen in revolt.

As I descended between steep rocks, I knew that Loch Coire MhicFhearchair lay close by. An icon of the Scottish mountains, at least on a summer's day. I glanced to the left; the loch hidden

from my view ... but something else caught my attention. A shape lying below the rocks that wasn't completely grey. I took a step closer - red and blue. A moan arose from it ... from a body! I was not alone. A shiver ran down my spine. And then I grasped why. If I took a step further, I would have to deal with what I found. The initial instruction given to every first aider raced to the forefront of my mind: 'Ensure your own safety before you rush in to help.'

I looked away. There would be no back-up until Sine had realised that there was a problem and had raised the alarm. And how could I? ... I had diverted from the route that I had left with her. The search would be on the wrong side of the mountain! And there would be no helicopter in this blizzard, would there? No-one could survive for long in these conditions. If I were to engage, there would be two corpses lying there before dawn. Reason was all important. I turned round. I had to put Sine and our little girl first, not a nameless person with no real hope. My mind and my heart united. And they wouldn't know that I had seen, but that I had walked past.

That I had walked past. My thoughts rarely strayed to what I had learned as a lad but the story came to me as an arrow reaching its target. The two who saw, looked away and continued on their journey. The one who stopped and went over, placing himself in grave danger. How he cared for his 'neighbour' until the innkeeper could take over. And then the sucker punch ... 'You, go and do likewise.'

Surely it was a coincidence that I was on the mountain. That I was on the wrong side of it. That I had turned my head. Surely there wasn't a bigger picture. Everywhere I looked there were only rocks and hard places.

I felt my head turn back towards the poor soul and then my feet moving. A beard was emerging from the hood. My voice ... speaking to the half-buried man. Words came from his mouth, another language or perhaps the confusion caused by an injury or hypothermia, or both. I kneeled beside him. A little blood trickled from his ear, leaving a dark stain below. His breath slowly coming and going, his body shivering. Though I might stem the flow of blood it was probable that he had a serious head injury. But that wasn't my concern ... his killer would be the cold. Hypothermia was already taking its toll, but he could be helped. I gently moved him into a cleft in the rocks. I took the shelter out of my rucksack and wrapped us inside. Our common enemy delayed ... but only as a wall of sand against the waves of the incoming tide. I propped the man up against the rock, his empty daysack behind him. I offered him my emergency chocolate and he opened his mouth. I lifted a cup of warm coffee to his lips and he drank. I put my extra jumper on him and dry gloves. I wrapped a bandage round his ear and put a dry hat on his head. If only I had a way of transporting him to a warm inn nearby. Keeping him awake was going to take whatever energy I had left within.

I gave him the rest of the chocolate and he lifted the cup of coffee to his lips. A faint smile emanated from his face and I felt a relief of sorts. But as I took the cup from him there was a shake in my own hand. The sweat on my back was suddenly dreadfully cold. I had paid no attention to my own state in the minutes that had gone by ... or was it hours? I fumbled into my rucksack. Empty. An image of the two of us on a seesaw came into my mind but I couldn't figure out why. Two had fallen among thieves and they were both desperately needy now.

Little by little the light was dimming. The head-torch failing ... or my eyes growing heavy? Sine and Catriona came into view, somewhat hazy, standing by the stove. Fear on their faces, as if they could perceive something that they couldn't see, their eyes pleading with me to find resolve that I did not possess. An oppressive heat radiated from the flames. My fingers tried to grip my

jacket, but something ... someone restrained them. Him! Harm for help. Evil for good. And no resources with which to fight back.

Like an old cat I felt myself curling into a ball in front of a fire that was too hot, but without the strength to withdraw. The light had almost gone. Even the heat was beginning to cool. But the noise raged on. Viscous gusts probing and tearing. Echoes piercing through the wind. And strange voices.

There I was guiding a horse from a sandy desert and into an oasis. A broken, bloodied man lying on my horse. An innkeeper coming out. Giving him all the money I possessed. The smile on my face. I had been his neighbour. I had saved him from certain death.

My mind's eye closing. Darkness seeking to suffocate the remaining light. But not yet succeeding. The light surging, now blinding. A white desert all around. Peering closer as into a mirror. A man lying at the base of a rock. Alone. Pale. Stiff. Half-dead. A door opening below. Suction towards it.

But those strange voices again. Louder. Nearer. Above.

Strong hands now lifting me. My neighbours.

An all-powerful noise high above. Being drawn to it. A tornado encircling. Out of the storm. And the door being shut.