

Mountain Writing Competition 2021

Prose 2nd equal

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By Peter Beattie

A city dweller who was inspired as a child by friends to love our countryside and mountains, Peter now lectures on land-based issues and good land management at D&A College, while writing poetry, prose and a never-ending novel in his spare time.

We walked the ancient path, climbing from the cobbled shore, etched our route across the Moine, glistening with garnet and biotite. Behind us the great briny loch vanished in a sea grey gloom; a peculiar mix of rain amidst mist, deadening sound, dulling light, depressing spirits. The scent of salted air diminishing with height until we smelled only pine, hazel, birch and myrtle, red resin, green sap and leafy camphor.

We walked the ancient path, recalling our childish exploration when we first found the stones that formed walls, kirk and village. We were then blind to the history, dumb to the rocks that cried out, 'Injustice!' Deaf to the sounds left by children, who thought in the old Gael tongue, who had learned the names of the hills we could barely pronounce. Today we would revisit, with all we have learned in forty years since and stand where our forebears stood, loved and lived.

We walked the ancient path until, before us, the ochre soil boiled out. Yesterday's great flood, drenching our journey had drenched this hill till, like a great evisceration of entrails from slaughtered stags (and many must have been gralloched near here), the saturated, sodden soil had burst its bowels. Stone, mud, glaur, fragments of plants overturned: primula planted upside down, embarrassed like overturned maids, their dirty skirts above their heads their rooty legs dangling in the air.

Here we lost the ancient path, buried beneath bruised, bracken brash. Bell-heather, dragged down the slope, stretched out and muddied, entwined with strands of sphagnum, lichen, lungwort and battered bed straw, testament to the wetted slope which had failed them when full and fertile.

The torn wrench of slope had created a bowl, slip-slid in crescent fault, to create a scarp too steep to scale, unstable, uncertain, like our plans now. The ground resembled a battlefield where clansmen and their clansfolk lay stranded, strewn and sinking into the very sod from whence they solemn came. A mighty blast had changed the landscape and more – altered the realm.

For where the queen of trees had stood, under whose branches we'd taken past shelter (we'd sat with bread and cheese, fought the midge, laughed in daftness), she was gone, dethroned, usurped, picked up, thrown down. Ah Jezebel's fate! She, the final oak before the peat-stained village, ancient by our first visit, was dead. Twice dead. Uprooted, alone, without a seedling child that had escaped the hungry maw of Blackface sheep or withering winter storms or careless charcoal cutting.

We crossed the wetted, slithering slope to where she lay, prostrate, to pay our regards, to this gnarled Queen in muddy state. If we could we would have raised her to her feet placed her back in crooked splendour, crown capped with verdant leaves which still contained her insect kingdom:

larvae, bugs, spiders, flies, not yet aware the sap had stopped, rooted in her Kingdom, adorned with lichen lace.

Instead, we stood around, gazing on the shattered beams, the fractured trunk, counting the past through rings, beyond when we'd last met here, towards the times of feast and famine, come and go, there and then.

How strange that only after she is gone, do we realise her worth. She was our rest and must have been the same for every other weary walker up that path. A shelter too in summer heat, a brief respite from harshest winds of winter come to blast the slope. A marker for the village then, to show the break of hill in snow and hail, where sailor met the cautious caileag, just below the village view, to bind arms around the ancient trunk with a promise to renew a love that grew in fits and starts as seasons waxed and waned.

He placed his hand upon the base to grasp the clay that fed the roots, smearing it between fingers, lifting it to his nose, peering at its red-brown taint. As I watched, he picked away, probing, prodding into this packed earth, retrieving one then two round bulbs, like tiny snowdrops, but deepest blue. They now became most precious things. A spit upon his open palm and rub upon his shirt. The secret now emerged – two beads of stone. A hole in each, to bind them to a wrist. One larger than the other, notched to hold the smaller jewel. A symbol of a tryst, or wedded bliss or something more – a hope for safe return unto this wooded shore?

Neither superstitious, we marvelled on the chance that each should see this tiny gift, left or lost so long ago and contemplated on the rightful act. He acted first. He gave to me the larger of the two, and said a hurtful thing, that we should turn about this day and walk back down that ancient path and keep each stone, the better to remember.

'We'll not be back again', he said, in truth, 'When one is gone the other should gather up these simple pearls, return to here and lay them down, beneath whatever tree shall grow amongst this torn and tortured field'.