

Good Bones

By Ruaridh Pringle

Looking back it seems ironic that, of all places, here was where part of my life ended. Too many pleasurable days had been shared here, on sun or snow-kissed Beinns and Sgurr, or snug indoors as feathery fingers of frost sought each other across window panes or gales played with lampposts like a cat with a string ball, and drove sheets of spray from Loch Broom clear over the town. It was of course partly my fault. I hadn't noticed how rotten our connecting thread had become; could not have predicted that all it would require was one brief pull (literally) in some other direction for the whole tense structure to unravel. I look back now at the remains and see the frays were obvious to everyone but those it mattered to most.

Time passes. Summers and winters come and go; their quiet triumphs and tragedies building a fresh landscape of which once formative events are now only a dark and seldom visited country. Looking back I again see the sunlight for all the beautiful things it was; recall lung-fulls of clear as the elixir I had searched for, and found. Someday perhaps I'll return to my dark country and be unafraid to stay there for a while.

But not today.

Today, I recall. A rise at the crack of dawn; complaints, frowns, eagerness. A long hitch northwards up the A9, morning mists, a flirtatious smile, greasy chips. A camper-van fits somewhere; wallowing horribly on uncooperative roads; nausea on a soft, swaying couch smelling of dog food. A long journey, but further details won't come. Not even sure now whether we camped overnight when we reached Inverlael, or whether instead we arrived yearning for activity despite a morning's rough and hectic journey, or (more likely) whether I dragged us both straight into the hills, lamenting the march of morning towards afternoon; youth towards middle-age.

The forests of Glensguaib: a big urban machine turning life into toilet roll, soil into pound notes. Straight-jacketed pines above an uneasy stream wondering what kind of alien world it has blundered into. The battle zone is a line of timber and wire stretched across the map. Beyond, the River Lael flashes silver, innocent of its claustrophobic fate. The path lazily does what paths do, and Gleann na Sguaib is quite, quite beautiful: a staircase of heather, gravel and grass rising to distant precipices made mysterious by haze. Despite the fuggy sky, the sun shines warmly. Cool breezes tumble from fields of spring snow dying quietly on Beinn Dearg's marbled pate into alleys where glaciers once stalked. The mind replays two figures rising steadily, yet there is no effort or unpleasantness here: no price. The flies, the sweat and blisters which new boots surely created were long ago dropped on memory's cutting room floor. Cliffs loom, seeming proud, though I'm sceptical they feel that way. The path is my thermal: my feet have wings and I long to stride out. But other legs are not so willing. They dawdle and so I must wait. I smile as their owner approaches, and is quickly directed to the banks of the nearby lochan. "Left a bit.... can you look at the cliffs? No, face left thirty degrees...Thanks." Click. Another memory stored for later self-punishment.

Broad and stony, pool-spattered and windswept, a high bealach provides rest for those who need it, and glimpses of shadowy places no car-bound person would ever see. Soon I am pushing us on up the steeper slopes of Beinn Dearg and onto its bald head a kilometre above Loch Broom's liquid gunmetal. Haze has dimmed the surroundings; clarity fading softly into silvery distance. Even so, cameras are out again: prostheses for fallible, forgetful memories, rather than extensions of any creative mind. They record achievement, and not the view. I am assured with a smile that the climb was worth it, and I am happy.

Steps are retraced to the bealach's back of creeping rocks and parched grasses. Then it's up again, scampering over rocks and turf, come on, come on, time's galloping, we'll never reach Eididh nan Clach Geala if we don't push. Cona Mheall is a fine Munro; fossil bones stacked neatly above the

brittle depths of impressive Coire Ghrunnda, which summons echoes of waterfalls rumbling over chill cliffs. The sky no longer even pretends to be blue. It is thick and grey; clinging to skin like a sweaty shroud.

Two summits remain and evening is gaining, please hurry, just a little, I don't want to turn this into a route-march, but we don't have all day....I don't say it though; just spring off at a Northwest tangent, a dog chasing his own very personal, idiosyncratic stick. Back again to the very same bealach, then onwards into the new, the undiscovered. Meall nan Ceapraichean, Munro number three of the day, overall number....Can't remember, not now, not then. Not that I think it would have mattered. Hardly a prominent mountain by any standards (definitely a meall), but I haven't been here before, and I like the feel and colours of the rocks, and the soft aroma of the heather and dry grasses which peep from the shadowy gaps between them.

It has good bones, this hill - and, like much of this strange land, a resonance beyond the physical, which seeps up through my feet into parts of me that are hollow, filling them, like a good reel or uisge-beatha. Why here? A question she would ask. Why the Highlands again? We have lovely countryside a minute's walk away. Can't you just for once stay this side of the Highland Boundary Fault and enjoy what we have here?

Introspection quickly turns defensive as the cool evening waits with me - or perhaps I'm recalling from another time. Munros are just a pathway, or so I tell myself. A framework for someone who lives in chaos yet needs to delve, to uncover, to explore places which, by their very inaccessibility, are interesting. How can there be interest without challenge? We were hunters, once - gatherers, nomads; explorers by nature, and every day was a life in itself exactly because it might have been the last. The mind has forgotten, but the blood remembers. Through the genes our ancestors speak to us, and if, while it is able, the body is willing to listen, where is the shame in that?

Onwards from Meall nan Ceapraichean, bald bony slopes drop to a high glen, hidden from all but the gods. Here we are utterly alone but for contemplative frogs, beetles which scuttle between rocks, and the whispering breeze. She is plodding now. Feet drag, and I am made to feel guilty of longer legs and bigger lungs. The sky has dimmed to strange hues; the low sun catching the sky like a huge brass shield. This is summertime, I tell myself. There is no problem, we'll be down before dark.

The climb to Eididh nan Clach Geala is our last. Once more I'm brazenly off ahead, seeing little reason to moderate my steps. Once more I wait, and then we are together in the gloaming; all smiles, perhaps in tune with one another for a brief moment. Westwards, countless bog-lochans twinkle across the moors like gold-dust as the sun drifts slowly to bed.

We linger for a time: ten minutes perhaps. Then we are on the dragging descent back into Gleann Sguaib. The first stars appear. I relax into my stride once more, stopping every now and again to wait; content to watch the horizon's breathless slow deepening into velvet darkness as my companion catches up. In the glen I make it my turn to follow; finding each step a struggle against momentum my body wants to embrace.

Time passes. We are in the forest, and then in my tent, near a fence above the river. Then later, we are watching noisy Glaswegians make the old suspension bridge over Corrieshalloch bounce and shake. Then we are escaping hordes of midges up An Teallach, on a day of playful breezes and luminous skies.

The next day is my Birthday, and I am on top of A' Mhaighdean. It is my fourth Munro of a long day, and I have one left before my day is over. I have been here for the best part of an hour. I am totally alone, and as happy with the world and my place in it as I'll probably ever be.

I gaze over the half-water, half-land that is Letterewe forest, raise my face to the breeze, and smile.

