

Barrow

by Eotyrannus

I

Somewhere in Scotland a man was running away from his town and up, into the forested hills. Robert Kirk, 28 years old, a bachelor, diagnosed schizophrenic, ran for the joy of it every morning: he was on an uphill path he had neglected until now, usually preferring other directions in the arterial branching of disused, narrow trails. He had always felt some instinctive aversion to this path, but this time boredom of the other routes had won out.

His feet pounded the dirt, feeling through his shoes the shape of the soil and rocks underneath. Early dawn afforded him just enough light: trees loomed forward in the mist, the dark gaps between them resolving into human forms, then dissolving again into random tangles of branches. His breath came hard, but was rhythmic and controlled. Late October air bit coldly at his bare face and arms. His legs were starting to tire on the slope, but he felt good.

It was a tough climb that had been stopped short by an unexpected fence. Panting, he needed several minutes to control his breathing enough to read the laminated A4 zip-wired to the padlocked gate: a council notice of construction. New housing, necessary for a growing imported population. There were no buildings yet, but behind the fence trees had been cleared, and a large dirt road was being formed.

He was at first only upset by the obstacle, the fence that had stopped his run. Then the realization came to him that this was not just a fence, but soon a paved road, concrete housing, workmen, noise, people, strangers—in whom he always saw hatred and violent thoughts borne towards him. He was angry, unbearably so. This was no delusional persecution: he had run to escape the town, but the town had not allowed this. It had chased him here and reminded him there was no escape from its filth and

violence.

Then, he had been interrupted by a strange noise: whistling. It at first sounded like that of a man, but was not a song or call. The pitch swooped bizarrely, putting his hairs on end, and stopped suddenly to be followed by a sequence of loud clicks. The noise had some unnatural quality, and he froze—rigid, barely breathing, flooded with a new course of adrenaline. He listened intently for a source, like an animal hearing a twig snap beneath a hunter's foot. Staring into the darkness between the trees, his eyes fixated on a figure: pale, elongate, too tall, staring at him. He stared back, trying to make out more detail, unsure if he was looking at a person, or the illusion of a chance overlap of branches, or something else entirely. Then the whistling began again, this time from the opposite direction. He realized there was more than one of them, whatever they were, and ran.

This was not the kind of run by which he had come there. It was panicked flight, driven by overwhelming fear, terror that wiped out every other thought in his head. The noises were chasing him, from behind and to either side, and he pressed faster. With the instinctive thoughts of hunted prey, he knew that there were not just two things chasing him, but many. His breath came in a frantic stridor, and a sharp pain stabbed through his diaphragm with each gasp. His legs felt numb and moved faster than he could coordinate, making him stumble. Pale figures flitted in the shadows of his peripheral vision, and as his head spun frantically from one side to the other, trying to see what was chasing him, he thought he saw more of the too-tall figures matching his pace between the trees, leaping forward with unnatural agility.

He was nearing the edge of the forest when something dashed out in front of him, and leapt back into the trees before he could make out any detail. Shouting with fear, he stumbled and fell. The forest floor was soft, and the adrenaline helped him to roll and quickly right himself, using the inertia of the fall to fly forwards in a new sprint. Breaking out of the trees, he did not stop running. Despite his hatred of the town, re-

lief spread through him as he entered it and began to run down sidewalks illuminated by streetlamps. The concrete and artificial light seemed to banish away the supernatural, he was sure they were hostile to the things from the forest chasing him. Although calmer, his flight only really ended after he threw himself back into his flat, slamming shut the door and ramming a chair beneath the handle in a weak barricade. There, gasping for breath, choking and spluttering on water, he forced several anti-psychotic tablets down and huddled under his blankets until the drugs sent him to sleep.

II

“I could hear them while I was running.”

Robert stared at the floor as he said this, uncomfortable at the admission.

The office was cold, bare: four plain white walls, warped chipboard desk, a mess of wires splaying from a computer, a few uncomfortable chairs. It had been built quickly, cheaply, and carelessly. The psychiatrist leaned forward; he was used to reticence from his patients.

“Could you understand what they were saying?”

“Uh, no.”

“Then what did you hear?”

“Uh, they were talking. They were chasing me.”

The psychiatrist leaned backwards again in annoyance. Robert didn't know his name, it was someone different each time he attended clinic. Inevitably they took on a similar expression of exasperation when they didn't hear what they wanted, or perhaps didn't hear anything that made sense to them. They understood schizophrenia from an academic perspective. It was still frustrating trying to disentangle the strange ideas and bizarre, magical thoughts originating from an obscure, internal logic.

“How did you know they were talking, then?”

“Uh...it meant something. I don't know what. They—”

“Okay, alright. Were they telling you to do anything?”

“Uh, no.”

“Did they want you to hurt yourself, or someo—”

“No.”

The usual line of questioning. The psychiatrist looked entirely bored now, giving up on hearing anything that interested him. He grimaced at the monitor, which displayed lists of medication.

“You’re taking the olanzapine every day?”

“Uh, yes.”

“You don’t ever miss a day? Feel like you don’t need it? Or does it make you feel ill?”

“Uh, y—no. Yes. Uh—”

“We’ve had a chat about the depot anti-psychotic, do you remember? The monthly injections. I think it’s something we should really consider, now.”

When it was over Robert left the office, glancing at the other patients in the waiting room. There were three, sitting under yellow fluorescence: A very slim man, almost skeletal, twitching and glaring, daring anyone to question his presence. A fat, sallow woman staring forward at nothing with an empty gaze, very still. A black who looked around Robert’s age, and was somehow familiar to him in mannerisms—shy, cowed, afraid of something the others couldn’t see or hear.

The building he emerged from blended into the others, built only a few decades ago out of concrete that was already stained and warping. The clinic was demarcated by a blue and white NHS SCOTLAND sign stamped into the building by screws trailing rust. The street itself was filthy with litter and spilled garbage, and the smell made him catch his breath.

Walking home, he watched other pedestrians. Lone figures, eyes fixed straight ahead or glaring suspiciously at others. An elderly couple, ill at ease in the ugliness and loneliness of the town, uncomprehending of what had brought this change or why. The town centre was more rotting concrete, garish convenience stores; shopfronts of chains, bolts, and shutters. There were dirty bus shelters decorated with bright posters of smiling interracial couples advertising high-interest loans. On the other side of the street, one of the thin, jittery addicts who were now commonplace was stumbling, shaking, and yelling. Passers-by were pretending he wasn’t there.

Having returned, finally, to the reassuring familiarity of his flat, he examined the new boxes of medication. More anti-psychotics, which, of course, he had not been taking with any

regularity. They made him feel ill and induced a dull stupor. Still, from a small insight in the back of his mind he knew things were getting worse. He had never, and could never, function in society with or without the medication, and that thought combined with the misery of the town he had just walked through sent him into a sudden black paroxysm of despair. He collapsed into bed and slept without dreaming.

III

Now, running for the first time since the incident, Robert was climbing the same hill. With the medication, he should not see or hear anything to scare him. Nevertheless, he had deliberately started his run late so that the sun brightly illuminated the forest. Darkness could play tricks on his vision, and his mind was more likely than most to perceive strange things where there were none. The day was cold, bright, and clear, and soon he had reached the fence.

The gate was open, and in full daylight the hill appeared different enough that he was not afraid of it. He wandered into the artificial clearing ahead and rested for a moment on a stump. There were several construction vehicles there now, empty, and he saw the litter of a workman's lunch had been scattered nearby. He felt rage growing in him at people's inability, even in the smallest of actions, to respect nature. If an action didn't directly hurt them, then it was permitted. It was as if, he felt, these people had lost the ability to see anything but their own small, petty lives.

As he sat there, growing angrier, he knew, by sudden insight, that this hill had held importance for hundreds of years, thousands. Long ago, when Man first came to this land, they had fought another people, and here one of that other species had been buried. His ancestors had known to avoid the barrow. Death did not mean the same for the Aos Sith as it did for Man.

Starting up, the line of thought was broken. His anger was replaced by guilt. He was not supposed to have these thoughts, knowledge that came into his head unbidden, although he knew, instinctively each time, that they were deep and undeniable truths. Delusional thinking, a burden of his illness. Perhaps if he took the medication regularly, he would not be troubled by

this. Robert turned back to the gate, trying to bring his mind again to the vacant peace of the anti-psychotics. Walking back, he saw something he had missed on entering the clearing: a body slumped against the inside of the fence.

It was a construction worker: high-visibility jacket, utility belt, hard hat and workboots. The body was partially covered by dead leaves, hiding it somewhat, and was coated in dirt. Cautiously, he approached, and the body remained unmoving. Closer, he could see the limbs were splayed at odd angles, but there was no obvious external injury, and no blood to be seen. It possessed the characteristic strangeness of real corpses, so unlike in movies—empty and still, dirty, awkwardly posed. The expression was one of pain: filmy eyes rolled upwards, jaw clenched and teeth bared.

When he fled this time, there were no strange noises. All he heard were the pulls and gasps of his breathing, and the thuds of his panicked footsteps.

IV

The psychiatrist, and this time a nurse, too, were staring at Robert. Their gazes bore down and penetrated his skull, and with this he felt their hatred and disgust. He tried to smile apologetically, but his face only twitched. His head ached, and his body felt light and alien beneath him. They were talking again, but their speech seemed meaningless. Their hatred took form, and although their words tried to disguise it, it burrowed into him. He tried nodding, hoping it would bring them closer to letting him leave.

“Are you listening, Robert?”

Flinching, he nodded more vigorously.

“What you’re telling us makes me think your illness is getting worse. It sounds as if the hallucinations are visual, too, now, and it seems like they’re upsetting you.”

The psychiatrist was talking about the injection, which would help him. The depot anti-psychotic. He wouldn’t need to worry about pills, remembering to take them, deciding whether he should or not. It would be easy, and it would cure him. The nurse agreed with the psychiatrist. She said the injection would make him better. Cowering farther into himself, Robert muttered agreement. It was too confusing, and he wanted to leave. It had all become so tiresome.

He was back in the street now, where it was dark. Robert couldn’t remember if the appointment had ended, or if he had simply walked out. He couldn’t feel the injury of a needlestick anywhere: if he had agreed to the injections, they hadn’t given him one yet. The night was cold, and it was odd that it was night, as his appointment had been in late afternoon. The shopfronts were closed, lights off except for streetlamps, and the street was empty. This relieved him, and he relaxed somewhat. Checking

his watch, it was late evening, October 30th. Tomorrow was Halloween, which had once been called Samhain. A time of proximity between worlds.

Before dawn, he was walking up the hill. He had not slept, and felt too exhausted to run. At this time of year, it would not be light for hours, and even at this slow pace he struggled to see enough of the path in front of him so as not to trip. Moonlight reached between the trees, and the silver illumination was just enough to see by. His body still felt too light, weak and uncoordinated, and he realized he had not eaten anything in days. The light became stronger as he approached the top, and now it looked to him as if the forest was glowing. Today was Samhain, he knew, and something had drawn him back to the hill.

Robert reached the fence, and passed through the open gate. Turning to look for the body, he saw it was still there, but now there were several more large, dark bundles lying beside it. Approaching, he could see they were more dead men, limbs twisted and bent. He sat on another stump, facing the bodies, and waited, listening.

He knew by another bestowed insight that long ago, hundreds of years, thousands, it had been men like him who had communed with the Aos Sith. Ordinary men could not see or hear them, but had feared them greatly, and men like Robert were not outcasts, but revered. But just as the Aos Sith were long gone from this land, any treaty that had existed between them and Man was long forgotten, and he was now a trespasser on the barrow, the burial mound of something ancient and inhuman, and death did not mean the same for the Aos Sith as it did for Man.

When the noises came, it was all at once: whistles rising into shrieks, and staccato trains of frenzied clicking. This time, he could see them clearly: thin, pale, elongate figures between the trees. One had stepped into the clearing. It was tall, at least two metres, thin and gracile, naked but covered in tattooed patterns and runes. The skull was narrow, very white skin pulled taut around a strange, cruel face. It had no hair, and slit-like eyes. The

arms were disproportionately long, like that of a gibbon, and it was grasping something in its hand, he could not see what. There was enough similarity to Man to suggest common lineage, but simultaneously the inhumanity and unfamiliar physiology of another world. The sight filled him with terror—it was a sight that the human mind had evolved to recognize and immediately return one overriding thought: flee.

This time, though, Robert could not run. The town was Hell, and if he ran to safety there he would be swallowed up by the same disease that was killing it and its people. The misery that afflicted all of them, the filth and hopelessness reminding them of their place as slaves, would eat him too. He would not go down as easily as the rest, but the injection would wipe his mind of resistance, wipe his mind of any thoughts at all. He hated them, he hated the town, and when he had run from it, the town had followed him to poison the woods, too. He did not feel any courage, but the thought of returning to that black despair was too much, and he could only stand as the pale thing approached and spread its enormous arms.

V

Pseudohistories of Scotland and Ireland tell of the Aos Sí, or Aos Síth, or sometimes Aes Sídhe who inhabited these lands before Man ever came. Man fought and defeated them, but it is said they retreated under the hills, and for centuries there were grave warnings against offending them. Now the stories are gone, and what has replaced them is nearer to mockery. Still, an open and credible ear can hear local tales of strange happenings in the hills, and you may find a small town in Scotland to hear one such tale. The town is decayed and ruined, rotting concrete and filth where once were pastures and forests, and slaves where once were a proud people. This ruin is not the doings of the Fair Folk, but rather the designs of another tribe of Man. Still, you may hear a tale of elves in the forest beside the town. They say there were homes to be built there, but there are no homes to be seen amongst the trees. They say that deep in the forest, in just the right dawn light, you may catch sight of elves dancing to the tune of their strange music. And dancing with them is a man—naked, bearded, insane, and his eyes aglow with joy.