

*“The woman holds the basket, but there are no fruits in it.
The man stabs the sheep, but no blood flows.
Nothing that acts to further.”*

Stab, stab, stab.

In the light of the new moon, the glint of the Machrie Water as it glides between the trees is the same cold hue as the blade of steel he wields in his wildly plunging fist.

Spurt, spurt, spurt.

Blood in his eyes, his hair, his mouth. On his hands, his clothes, his boots. Warm blood, sticky blood. All over the stone, the killing stone, the cropping stone.

Gideon: he who crops, hews, cuts down.

Gideon Byrne has his own adage: he who crops gets drenched in blood. Even when he shouldn't. Even when it says so explicitly in the reading.

So why the blood?

Why hadn't it read, *The man stabs the sheep, and geysers of blood spurt all over the place?* Why hadn't it said that?

Maybe the Book of Changes, the *I Ching*, wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Maybe it was fallible. There was certainly nothing wrong with his interpretation of the reading. There it is on the cropping stone, the sheep, and there he is standing over it, the man with the knife in his hand, and there, if you rewind the scene a few hundred frames or so, is the man, him, stabbing the sheep. *The man stabs the sheep...*

How could any sane man misinterpret that? It was down there in black and white.

Until the bit ...*but no blood flows.*

Like hell it didn't. More blood in that sheep than any life-deserving creature had a right to. In fact, it was still pumping it out, though its life's momentum slowing now, the flow sluggish, the blood thick and black as oil, glinting too in the crescent light of the softly sucking moon. The sound coming from its torn throat like a wide pan of water, gently boiling.

Eyes.

He doesn't need to hold it down any longer, its struggles are but those of its nerves. The shadow of the nearest standing stone paints him black as he moves in closer. To peer. To watch its eyes as he pushes the blade of his knife slowly up its nostril.

Does he see anything he hasn't seen before?

Not this time.

The shriek of an owl. The distant hum of a car on The String. Machrie Water hustling down through the trees, dropping from Goat's Leap Pool to the Deep Pool, hurriedly on towards Laidlaw's Bend. The sky black overhead, fringed in chrome, Venus watching over you, admiring your style.

Stars.

Pulling you this way and that and you don't even realise it. Puppet on cosmic strings. All that energy. The same energy you are made of. What a delicate balance. How does the sheep weigh in the balance? Anything at all? How will its passing affect the scales? Create a little more energy somewhere else in the world, cause an earthquake, hurl a tidal wave at some unprotected shore? Or bring a new life to being? A new sheep, perhaps? One that doesn't bleed when it shouldn't?

You hope.

On a new moon.

Shackle your dreams to a new moon, watch them grow. Isn't that what your mother always said? No. Fat chance. She never said anything to offer you hope. Which is why she's secured away in the lockdown ward of the country's first privatised psychiatric hospital for the criminally insane. If she'd offered you hope back then she might not be there today. Simple as that.

Still, Elderburn House is better than Carstairs up the road, where she'd spent the last twenty-seven years. Carstairs is serious moon-howler preserve. People eating themselves alive in there. Getting their brainwaves recharged. Walking around with that goodbye look in their eyes, ready for the off at any given second. Pure mental. Not to mention the high security aspect. The kind of place they'll only let you out if you've got an axe in your hand. That's Carstairs for you. Elderburn House is like a holiday camp in comparison. The staff there all wear these name badges—Hi, I'm Betty, have a nice day; Hi, I'm Geoff, enjoy your ECT—it's that kind of place, pioneering. You can get in to visit your mother almost any time you want. Just give them a couple of days notice and it's "No problem, Mr Byrne, just pick up your pass at the gate, it'll be waiting for you there as usual." Easy come, easy go.

Silence.

Venus up there on the sea of the night, you down here on the sea of the Moor, both sailing courses predestined by forces unimaginable,

charting the unknown. She launching the new moon across the sky, you launching a sheep into the big forgetness.

It is still now, its blood no longer seeping onto the stone, sliding towards the grass. Back in the days when these standing stones were erected, they believed the blood from their sacrifices fertilized the soil, helped their crops grow. Back then the whole island would have been covered in trees, not a fucking sheep in sight. So they probably sacrificed each other, let the blood sink into this very same grass here, fertilize their next crop of chips. All the women rubbing themselves against the stones, trying to get shafted by the spirits of their ancestors.

Talk about crazy.

The coast road deserted, waves lapping lethargically on the rocky shore. Moon ploughing a silver furrow across Machrie Bay. Across Kilbrannan Sound, the black hills of Kintyre. Another world. Days long gone and the Revenue cutters would lie off shore there, hope to catch the smugglers plying the Sound by night, the whisky coming down from the stills in the hills above Imacher. Alive then, Gideon would have been celebrated in song, his exploits reknown across the land. Black Byrne. A kind of West Coast Rob Roy. He can picture it, there he is, night like tonight, standing one foot on the prow, his long kilt and sandy hair blowing in the offshore breeze, claymore strapped to his back, the oars gliding silently through the swell, the Revenue cutter half a league off, bearing down, the prospect of battle firing through his veins, a contemptuous smile of anticipation on his lips—yeah, that's the way he sees it, the way it would have been.

The way it should be.

Gideon pulls in and climbs out, sits on the seawall awhile, breathing in the scent of the Sound, letting the sound of the waves and the lick of the moon wash over him, bring him back down.

Nowadays a superior man has to struggle to find unchartered waters, a cause worth dying for. You have to think things through now, plan a campaign carefully, weigh the pros against the cons, get yourself a public relations officer, airtime on all the major channels, bribe your way into the history books. The senseless ones buying every fucking word. The state of a nation on bended knees.

Gideon sighs. To hell with them all. Soon their eyes will open and then they'll recognise him for what he is.

The sheep is wrapped in a black tarpaulin. As Gideon lifts it from the back of his car, it almost slips out and he has to stagger to the sea-wall, drop it immediately over the edge. Come high tide, it'll drift away, feed the fishes, feed the gulls. And good riddance. It's been a long, tiring night. And tomorrow night will be just as long if he's going to finally get it right. Go down the south of the island, plenty more sheep down there. Fields of them. This time, though, think it through, take his time, make sure no blood flows. Not blame the *I Ching* but seek the error within himself.

The action of a superior man.