

## The Lochan

The lochan lay high on the hill above the valley, between a deep stand of birches and the moor. Stiffly fringed with reed, black under cloud, blue in sunshine, hidden far from the road. It whispered to itself under the changeful skies, hissing with the wind whipped up from the north east, kissing the shore gently on the still, hot days of summer. Once, long ago, a pair of swans settled and made their nest, returning year after year to raise their young and teach them the strong rhythm of flight. Year after year they returned, and in their turn, their young sought mates and found the place, swooping down to swim in harmony, white against the peat-black ripples of water.

The boy also found it. One day, fleeing from the shouted rage of his father, the weary despair of his mother, he ran for miles, further than the boundaries of his known world. Scrambling up and across a stony hillside of grass and rush, then deep into mossed and lichened woodland, he thrust at last through the stiff browned bracken of winter to stand at the edge of the water. It teased his naked feet as he pulled off his boots. It was cold with the ageless chill of darkness, deep as a cauldron set into the earth, measureless, unfathomable. Around it, the reeds rattled, yet not in warning. They spoke a language he had not yet learned. Two swans swam, sedate and gracious, beside the further shore. The boy watched and waited, still and safe. He had no food but drank water from his cupped hands to ease his empty belly. It was hours before he turned for home, retracing his steps, knowing what awaited him, but holding this secret that he would not share.

He was sorry to grieve his mother. She had feared for him, gone for so long. He looked up at her face with new insight. She rubbed her brow with a gesture he had always known but never before understood. All her sadness, all her care for him, was conveyed to him through the chafing of her forehead, the way she wiped her hair out of her eyes and then

turned to warm the broth she managed to conjure out of the poor food they could afford. He laid his hand on hers as she held the wooden spoon and she started, gasped, looked at him and saw his vulnerable love. ‘Your father will be home any time now,’ she said, urging him to be quiet, careful, to keep out of sight as much as he could. They would eat together, a tense and bitter meal, then perhaps the man would go down the lane to drink silently with other men like himself, known from childhood. Since he came back from the war, his wife and son had lived within the shadow of his rage. He would work the sparse fields of the croft, tender only to the cows, and come home in the evening tired and demanding, of food, of the obedience of his son, of, later, the receptive body of his wife. The boy heard them sometimes: her muffled cries, his angry groans. It sounded to him as if she was the victim of his fury and he marvelled that she would still show him love. He saw her patient, hopeful tenderness when the man came home weary from the fields. There was so much that he didn’t understand. The memory of the man his father was before he had swung away to war, kilted and proud, had gone from him. Perhaps there had been laughter; strong arms that picked him up and swung him high, carried him on a shoulder. He could not remember. This man was an angry stranger.

On weekdays the boy was up early to help to bring the cows in for milking, lifting the heavy gate with its iron latch and stumbling after his father to bring them from the field. Later he went to school, more than two miles down the lane, and sat rigid in the row of desks, learning to make marks of number and letter that he could not join up in his head to make any meaning. But within his mind, stories ran like deer. Words leapt and danced for him in tales that summoned him to escape, if only for a moment, the harshness of his life. On rare occasions, on a Friday afternoon, the teacher would tell them stories, a strange mixture of history and heroism, legend and nature study. Eagles flew over desolate mountains; staunch Highlanders fell bleeding in the heather of Culloden and their families fled into hiding before

the scouring of the glens; salmon leapt impossible heights of roaring water; seals sang on the silver sands of the furthest western isles and some of them were men, under enchantment.

So, the boy moved through the seasons, his secret life more real, more true to him, than any of the deprivations of his existence. And whenever he could escape, he would run from the house and seek the lochan, clambering miles over rough hillside to the guardian birch trees and slipping between their silvered trunks to where it waited for him. Sometimes it was deep blue, reflecting a measureless sky. Sometimes, as the wind ruffled the surface, it dazzled him with light. But at other times, it was black and grim, and heavy storm clouds gathered and the rain pelted from the sky so that air and water mingled in one cacophony of sound and movement. The boy would watch from the edge of the trees, exhilarated, transfixed, despite the sodden clothes he wore or the rain soaking his hair. His exposed body turned to mottled purpled coldness, against which old bruises showed green and lemon yellow. He dissolved into the elements around him, melting, escaping, becoming one with the movement of the water, the energy of the storm.

His imagination dwelt on creatures of legend and he wove them into his own stories, his own dreams. The hunted deer was transformed into an eagle, soaring high above the hunter and screaming defiance from its eyrie remote on the crags. The salmon, caught on the hook, promised three things to the fisherman in exchange for life: wealth, warmth and the kindness of a woman. And this place, this was his own lochan. If you dipped beneath its waters, you would be forever changed. The boy was too young to know what kind of change could offer him hope. On many afternoons he waited shivering with anticipation on the margin. His bare toes gripped the sand with all its sparkling mica grit as he gazed out over the water. The swans seemed to gaze back at him yet with the inscrutable otherness of creatures. He dreamed of them sometimes, serene and immortal, swimming gently so that the ripples spread to touch the shore where he stood, shaking the reeds like the breath of the wind.

There were days when he missed school, drifting from the lane to duck beneath the stone wall and run alongside it to where he could be sure he was invisible from the house. Then he would strike diagonally across the hillside towards the skyline and the distant trees.

As the seasons slid slowly from spring to early summer the hay must be cut and dried and gathered for winter: many children would be away from school and no questions asked. The boy's father expected him to be alongside him and his mother to rake the green sweetness and gather it for drying. 'Tomorrow, son,' he said. 'After milking.' His hand fell heavily on the boy's shoulder.

But the boy, hearing the tone of threat and demand and not the words, fled from the byre the next morning as his father's back was turned and climbed the hill. Soon he was a distant figure on the horizon as his father emerged to drive the cows back to pasture. His father, shading his eyes as he looked up, saw the small figure before it disappeared. He entered the house, cursing the boy, needing his help. 'I'll take my belt to him,' he muttered, shaking off the entreaties of his wife. He strode up the hillside in pursuit, breathless and gasping by the time he reached the first line of trees, needing to stop and lean against one as his heart beat fast and heavy in his throat. He knew again that the effects of mustard gas, however brief a dose, experienced at the Third Ypres with the Seaforth Highlanders, would never leave him. His eyes smarted and swam and he could not regain his breath for many minutes. Slowly the quiet wood, so unlike the tormented and stricken woods where many of his friends had died, calmed him, even reminded him that there was still a world that was whole and undamaged by shellfire. Once, long ago it seemed, he had walked through woods like these without bitterness.

Perhaps, the boy thought, perhaps it will be today, and I will know what it means to be changed. He trod delicately through the bright green fronds of young bracken and the sappy bluebells that filled the birch wood with a purple haze. This might be an enchanted day and every step a spell. He stood once more on the edge and pulled off his clumsy boots, his coarse shirt, and let the sun touch him.

From the shadow of the trees his father watched him, seeing the awed stillness of the boy and how he extended his arms, his hands palm upwards as if in entreaty. Then his son moved forward, stepping gently in the shallows, parting the reeds, exploring the sand and rocks that lay beneath the dark water. Suddenly, the bed of the loch fell away, vertical, unplumbed, and he fell with it, plunging into unimaginable cold depths, gasping, panicking. His father, who had seen men drown in mud, and thought himself dead in all but physical necessities, ran forward, compelled with an urgency of love he thought was lost. 'Robbie! Robbie!' he called out, kicking off his own heavy boots and rushing headlong into the water, diving again and again until he grasped the boy's body and tugged him back to the shore. Holding him then in his arms, he brought him up to the shelter of the trees, rubbing him to bring back life and warmth, repeating his name again and again. How light the boy is, he thought, how young, and I had forgotten childhood, mine and his. I was there to save him, he marvelled. And myself, maybe.

The boy turned slowly to look up at him, this man, his father, whose arms held him and who was calling him by name. He struggled to understand what had happened, there in the water. Everything is somehow changed, he thought, with wonder.

The surface of the lochan was calm after sudden turbulence, its precipitous secret hidden. Its waters reflected the remote lapis blue of the sky. The startled swans resumed their placid, ageless motion by the reeds at the far edge.