

ASS3

LEAVIN EDEN

*“for at the heart of human civilisation
is the byre, the barn and the midden”*

Edwin Muir “Childhood”

*“We are affected strangely by any place from which the tide of life
has ebbed*

Neil Gunn “landscape to Light”

6 a.m.

Aye - it haed tae be the day o aw days - the young dug Gyp sent away by ower twa fields, yon A wan back frae the whins, and she brings the kye back tae the gate ane beast shy. Sae here A am up the brae field on the quad huntin for it. On wet days houlin wind and daudin shours are their ain brace o collies chasin the herd tae the bottom gate tae hugger drookit, hocks deep in clart, aw champin tae be inside the big shed. Meg hunkers doon aside me on the quad grateful for the hurl, nae a surprise - she's aulder than me in dug years and she's niver fully mendit sin A reverse't ower her wi the trailer. That wis a sair day and this is anither. A stap and luik back at the ferm. These few acres haundit doun throu generations frae faither tae son A nou gie tae naebody. A spot the heifer at the far dyke - she'll likely be in season. Wi the twa collies A'll tak her hame.

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Standing beside the hen hutch I can see Sandy driving the quad up on the hill. Something's wrong - the milking should have started by now. I can hear him shouting the dogs, his voice carries across the hillside. This whole day will be a struggle for him. He told me twice last night that he doesn't want me to feed the calves; would rather do it himself. Never mind, I've got plenty other tasks. First mucking out the dogs' beds, then throwing an armful of fresh straw into each of the calf pens, though many won't sleep here tonight. I've also taken milk out the tank - couldn't resist a slug from the jug - so creamy - a small reward for the long day ahead. I open the hen hutch door and reach underneath the feathers of the first bird on the nest searching for buried treasure, find two brown eggs. I cradle their warmth in my palm like any mother would before placing them in the plastic pail.

7 a.m.

For a moment A sit doon oan the parlour step waitin for ma slaw milker tae feenish. Aifter the late stert barely hauf the herd haes been milkt - aye mair difficult on yer ain but the day I prefer it. Nou this is aw second nature which itsel is a comfort and wi anely six kye comin in oan ilka side I can still cope wi it by mysel. A hae mind o ma ain faither haund-milking the beasts in the auld byre - aye afore it wis cawd doon and replaced wi this parlour. Bytimes A sense its presence still - lik wearing anither skin. Somethin leevin an breathin, nae a relict frae the past. That lost heifer's awready been in. Flichtie, she kicked aff her machine richt awa, stuid oan it syne and flung its hoof oot at me but missed. A've nae aye been sae lucky. Last year I took ane tae the chest. It floored me - O coorse A tellt naebody.

~

Here I am sat in the old Davie Brown in the big shed. Not sure why. It's been years since I've driven any tractor. My arthritic fingers grip the plastic steering wheel. I came from the city and his father didn't rate me, branded me "posh" but I was a quick learner. Those early years we worked the fields together. I rolled and harrowed as many acres as Sandy. But the boys came along and as they grew up, they began to take over bits of my job. Especially Cameron, or Cammy as his father called him, he loved anything with an engine, saw a beast that needed to be tamed in every machine. Alan was the complete opposite, loved to watch his father milk, fed the calves, could not sleep the nights they were sick. Together they were an ideal mix for the work needin done and no parent should have a favourite child.

8 a.m.

Old Brenda is the final cow into the parlour, as usual these days, dragging her hind leg since she did the splits last winter. She spent weeks flat out in one of the big pens. I'm certain either farmer would have sent her down the road the day after her fall but A persevered to get her back up on her feet though she's still not right. A set up the feeder to give her some milk today. This is her tenth lactation and she's the greatest milker I've ever bred. Good-natured enough she'd take the helter at the local show and after came back home with rosettes. Today her baggy udder hangs low and has little to give. A pull the clusters off, dip it in the pail then place my hand on her flank. She doesn't move. It's as though she knows she's the last cow I'll ever milk.

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Sandy's running way behind. Should have been finished by now. Not that I blame him for taking his time - This is a big day. The farm is looking tidier than it's done for years. Apart from the old milking machine's rhythm pulsating like a farm's heartbeat there is little else stirring. Just the odd calf crying out for its mother's milk, then two magpies in the old oak having a go at each other. It reminds me of those times Sandy fought Cameron - that back-and-forth chatter was always how it would start and then it'd work its way into a storm. Me in the middle trying to keep the peace and failing - they were so angry blaming each other and themselves, till finally that day Cammy walked out. He takes my weekly calls but has never once been back.

9 a.m

“You have to eat something” Elizabeth scalds me like a bairn. I ken she’s richt sae A reach for the cornflakes. “Ane the new caufs wis strugglin tae sook oan ma fingers in the bucket. Naething obvious, nae scoor but somethings up” Meg lies doon under the table. I pour milk intae her bowl. “What’s left to do?” “Juist tae gie some cake tae the stirks and some reddin up” A cannae luik her in the face A’ve let her doon, whit a mess. “And have you moved the car?” “Please gie us peace woman” “Whits wi aw the questions I cannae think straight” “I’m sorry” “Nae A’m sorry dear - it’s juist awthings thegither.” A niver hae the richt wurds tae tell her aw she’s aways been tae me.

~

“You have to eat something”, I worry about this man. Never heavy, he’s lost a lot of weight these last weeks. “Ane the new caufs wis struggling.” Over the years I have learned to switch off from his full update just pick enough to be seen to be interested. Typical, he’s more concerned about the beasts than himself. I try to change the subject. “What’s left to do?” and he answers me though clearly upset. He looks down and claps Meg under the table. “And have you moved the car?”. I should’ve just left it but set him off and end up apologising. “I’m sorry” “Nae A’m sorry dear - it’s juist awthings thegither.” His tired smile as rare now as a perfect harvest day.

10 a.m.

Rab leans back on the glentin siller side o his muckle lairge milk tanker and lichts up a quick fag. This is his ritual, listenin for the engine o his pump as it sooks ma bulk tank dry. Where aince he teuk three jurneys, he can nou pick up aw the milk in this area in ane wi space left ower. Aften he likes tae blether on aboot ma fairmin neeboors and aw their comins and goins but no the day. Insteid he glences ower at ma big shed wi aw the implements set oot in raws o nummert lots, afore uncouplin the pipe at the last dreeble o milk. Turnin tae me he says "That's it then?" and I reply "Aye, that is it."

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Margaret my best friend for over fifty years and a shepherd from the other side of the hill has invaded my kitchen with a couple of helpers from the rural. Between them they've brought warm scones, tray bakes and sausage rolls. The hug she gave me had the force of a big wave. "You'll get through this" she whispered in my ear. Now they've turned my table into a small production line of sandwich making. Everyone seems to know their role. Their conversation never stops. I am politely told I am not needed so watch from the chair. Don't any of them realise, no longer being needed is at the heart of my pain.

11 a.m.

A need tae be busy, brushin up some straw in the loose box. For shiur strangers will daunder awwhaur. E'en nou looks are important. Jack the neebour's lad is here and wirkin throu ma list o last minute tasks. He haes been a great help at the weekends these twa years - sic a blissin for his faither. But whit am A tae mine for A hae gied awa this place, his muckle maist treisur. Ma hip is yelpin bad the day, ten years efter it was replaced. Ma plastic knee is nae better. I lean back agin the loose box's cauld whitewash waw till ma heid staps birlin.

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One of Margaret's friends takes a break and goes over to the old dresser. She picks up the whisky bottle and the bible. "These twa can get you throu aw o life's challenges." "Aye" I respond, "and we still partake in both." I have mind of those Sunday mornings slipping quietly into the back pew after a late night at the dancing. "Is this your twa sons? they could be twins" "Eighteen months between them- the same difference between Sandy and me" "Are you younger?" "Of course," I reply and her big laugh fills the kitchen.

12 noon

Staundin seelent in the shower leukin doon ma slack body, its loose flaps o skin, yon peelie-wallie hackit shanks, the watter swilrlin at ma taes. E'en nou A'm taken by the shift in the colour o the watter as the muck an clart wash awa. There's aye thit merk and scent o the laund thit niver leaves. Showers throu the day are for funerals or bankers. Ower many funerals for neebours and guid freends but aw o thaim swallaed up by juist ane. Nae man shoud hae tae bury their bairn.

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Escaping the never-ending chat of the kitchen I pick up the car keys of the old red Skoda to move it round the back, out of the way. The engine doesn't sound great but starts first time. Cammy could sort this easily I'm sure but that is never going to happen. He has done so well - has his own garage now, four men working for him and still he turns jobs away. There's a couple of cracked slates on the ground. You'd have thought the way they're nailed on they'd last a lifetime.

1 p.m.

Oot and aboot again sportin ma best pair o mercat buits and an auld tweed jaiket foosty wi mothballs. Jack's awready shawn early arrivals - cars, tractors, floats, intae the field at the rear o the big shed. At least it's kept dry. A see the auctioneer's car arrivin. A've telt him thit A willna be staundin by him throu the sale, but will stey pairt o the croud, tryin to kid masel oan this is happenin tae somebody else.

~

Now we are in demand. The table has been carried outside and we're handing out tea and coffee and sandwiches to the first rush of neighbours. It's great to see children running around the yard again but it still sets me off. I have two grandchildren now, both doing well at secondary school. I get to see Cammy and them a couple of times a year. It takes three hours each way by train. I always go by myself.

2 p.m.

The sale starts on time. A fair croud o well kent faces, strangers, scrappies aw looking for the cheapest o deals. Afore the kye it's the implements - frae the Davie Broom, the New Holland baler, slurry tanker, auld scraper, sma trailer throu tae yets, cauf pens, pails - a dismantling o ivery single pairt o ma life. A leuk awa. A canna tak it.

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With the sale starting the thirst and hungers of our visitors subsides. I can't face going into the shed so wash plates and cups instead. Some more boxes have been dropped in to help us with our move to the village. Sandy was born here. This is all he's ever known. I worry that by taking him away from this farm he will simply give up the fight.

3 p.m.

Fir the selling of the beasts, I sit oan ane bale at the back o the shed, rest ma auld banes as Jack brings the lots in tae be sauld. His faither has brocht his wee float ower and though he hasnae said a wurd I ken he'll try his best to buy ane heifer or twa for me to come and visit.

~

Auctioneer's voice - hum of summer bees working flowers till all the nectar's gone. It was June, Cammy sleeping off a hangover, Alan sent to do his chores for him. The old tractor with bad brakes didn't stop, dropped into the slurry pit. He didn't escape that day. Nor have we.

4 p.m.

Sae quick in the end. The final lots flew by, floats aw loaded. The auctioneer's gien me a sale total but A'm nae listenin. This week A's telt A canna hae baith collies in the new flat, A can juist tak the ane.

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Some final goodbyes and thankyous to the helpers in the kitchen and I am on my own. I look again at the photo of our two sons. This place should've been their legacy, a gift for generations, but it stops here.

5 p.m.

Still oan the bale, Elizabeth finds me in the empty shed. The swallaes
flichter abuin oor heids readyin for their journey, but we'll gae first.

~

He's not come in so I go to him, wandering past buildings the factor
will soon turn into houses. I sit down beside him. There are no words.

6 p.m.

His hale tractor sunk intae the slurry. I reak oot ma haund, haud ticht
He's back there, his body's shaking. I reach out my hand, hold tight

7 p.m.