

For What Is Lost

Edward Arruns Mulhorn



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There rolls the deep where grew the tree.
O earth, what changes hast thou seen!
There where the long street roars, hath been
The stillness of the central sea.

The hills are shadows, and they flow
From form to form, and nothing stands;
They melt like mist, the solid lands,
Like clouds they shape themselves and go.

But in my spirit will I dwell,
And dream my dream, and hold it true;
For tho' my lips may breathe adieu,
I cannot think the thing farewell.

In Memoriam A. H. H., CXXIII
Alfred, Lord Tennyson

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The Lat

‘Shit.’

‘Yup. That just about sums it up.’

I look up. Socrates leans on his lazy mattock, his palms pressed hard on the handle’s butt, resting his weight on its shaft. The tail of his shirt hangs out of his jeans, and flaps in the withering breeze. He has pushed back his cap, and the groove of its brim has furrowed a fading white line on his forehead. His ears are burnished by late summer sun, his eyes wrinkled into a wince.

He smiles. What a bastard. What a bastard for standing here, watching me working. What a bastard for being at peace with the world, for being so carefree and calm. For milking the idleness of the moment. For savouring simplicity, standing here, watching. Rapt in the luminous now.

I turn back to the earth, kicking the neck of the spade with my boot, feeling it thrust through the dry dirt and stone that line the base of this ditch. Hearing it scrape through the shingled surface, scuffing its face with soil and grit. I bend forwards, lunging the blade and my forearms further into the deepening fissure, feeling the tension wrenching my back.

Again and again, I plunge the spade into the fractured body of earth, scratching its sinews, scooping its flesh, flipping it up and onto the mound which grows ever larger beside me. Spadeful by spadeful. Stab by stab. My limbs being sapped of their strength.

‘My turn.’

Socrates senses me tiring. He sees the slow of my staggered motion, the glow on my face, the size of the spoils diminishing on the plate of my spade. He has taken pity on me. I climb out of the trench, standing before him and wiping my eyes. A heap of loose soil is strewn by our feet. He is shorter than me, and slenderer too. His skin is pale though burnt by the sun on his cheeks, on his nose, on his neck.

He jumps into the ditch – a two-footed jump – the punch of his boots as he lands in its depths juddering the heathland around us. I pass him the mattock, and he blows on his hands, clasping his fingers around the shaft, testing it, feeling its weight. He rambles to the end of the trench. Then he raises the steel high into the air, holding it still for a fragment of time so its tarnished head is struck by the sun, before bringing it down with a speed and a force belying his stature and strength. The earth shudders, it trembles. I can sense the pulse quivering through the veins of the grass, through the soles of my boots and up through my legs, chasing electric waves to my brain.

Socrates raises the head once more. Again, a flash as it strikes the sun, a silver arc as the blade descends, a thump as it buries into the sod, a tremor as it troubles the ground. Then, a stillness, an empty echo. Socrates shuffles back half a pace while I peer within the cavernous hollow, at the gore of its bruised and beaten guts.

But already it's time to step back. The mattock is coming clear of the gully, being rhythmically raised and intent on destruction, bludgeoning into the land. It is brutal,

belligerent, and blind. He bullies the scrubland into submission, breaking its backbone, snapping its ribs, scarring its tissue with wounds. He carves incisions the width of the trench – each a half-dozen inches deep – then shunts back a pace and wields his weapon, beginning the carnage anew.

It is mesmerising, terrifying. This industry. This ravage of nature. This monstrosity. For millennia, this land has lain undisturbed. A thousand, thousand, thousand years compacted down harmoniously. Buried quiet and calm and still. Enjoying a serenity just inches from the wind and rain; a million miles from harm. Till now. Till Socrates defiled its rest. The slayer, armed with steel and smiles, intent on wreaking mayhem.

Birdsong. Vibrant, sun-soaked birdsong. I look up at the cobalt sky. Radiance extending further than sight; more brilliant still than breath, than life. An infinite pocket of innocence. Socrates has also paused. His assault subdued by the sheer splendour. The delight and purity of an unseen sound enchanting a captivated sky. He looks across at me, wide-eyed. Savouring this simplicity. The butcher turned poet, enraptured.

I glance down at the trough we have dug. He has sliced and filleted the full length of its furrow, barring a narrow platform to step on, which is where he ends and I start.

He scrambles out and throws down the mattock. He clasps the tails of his shirt in his fingers, fanning the fabric away from his skin, allowing his body to breathe. He looks towards me, and now, once again, I can see he is smiling. His immutable smile. His mouth, his dimples, his eyes.

I climb down to the step with my spade. I feel the weight of the tool in my hands. Already it's heavy; my body is heavy; my back unsupple and stiff. I shove the tip of the spade at the earth, feeling its sullen defiance. We have cut through the topsoil, the fine dry tilth, and now we have reached the cloying lumps of hefty, torpid clay. It's reluctant to loosen; reluctant to lie on the face of my scoop. Each clump is a surly and burdensome charge, weighed with resentment and hate. I bend lower, stooping over the crumpled entrails, straining my muscles to grasp them. The wedges bobble, precariously balanced, as I lift them clumsily into the air, as I spill them heavily onto the mound. I grit my teeth as I work, conscious of Socrates watching me closely – watching each load as it's pried from the ground – passing judgement on me.

I move a pace forwards, down from the step, onto the floor of the trench. I shunt the fierce dull tooth of the spade into the broken thicket of clay, manoeuvring it under a cluster of clods, heaving it up from the mass. It feels like we are digging a grave, though without knowing whose it might be. Does this belong to Socrates, or to me, or to somebody else? How will we die, and what will we die of? How come we chose to be buried out here? I guess there are lesser places to lie. There are many worse places to pick. In truth, this might be the best of all boneyards – in the wilds, far removed from mankind. To be washed by the rain and warmed by the sun. To have harebells and sneezewort grow on our chests. To merge with the land, becoming as one. To become all things for all time. To sink in the soil as man toils above, unheeding of what lies below.

My spade tremors on meeting resistance. An unseen object jars its momentum, shuddering vibration back through my hands and up through my arms, finding a home in my shoulders. I look down, expecting to see a relic, a trinket, a chest of gold. Or maybe the wooden sides of a coffin. I scratch at the soil with the edge of my spade, revealing what stands in my way.

It is only a stone. A simple stone. A stone that isn't even worth keeping. I pick it up and un-muddy its face, then throw it onto the grass.

I return to the sightless shade of my fissure, scraping out more wedges of clay, flicking them clear of the mouth of the hole, purposely aiming at Socrates in the hope that they splatter his boots. Instead, they strike him against his knee. He mutters something under his breath, but when he looks round, he is laughing.

Without speaking, we change places once more. I watch as he clambers into the trench, raising the mattock high over his head, bringing it down to cut through the ages, revealing the strata of secret lost worlds. He slices through the Anthropocene, and now he has reached the Holocene Epoch, exposing an interglacial era. I watch as the sleek blade rises and falls, beating out time as it punctures the land, as it thumps with a heartbeat preceding our own, borne of the Phanerozoic aeon. With each strike the Quaternary collapses. From Neogene through the Paleogene, we snatch at a glimpse at the Cretaceous. He raises his pickaxe again. Dinosaurs come into being and die as he uncovers the Jurassic, and then the Triassic. Another stroke from the pitiless steel, and the earliest tetrapods scuttle for shelter as we find

ourselves entering the Permian epoch. The Devonian, Silurian and Cambrian follow. He brings down the blade once again. We are here on the cusp of the Proterozoic. Multicellular lifeforms emerge, alongside plant matter and fungi. But he hasn't stopped yet; he is hungry for more. Socrates reaches into deep time, now entering the Archean aeon, where fossilised remnants of single-celled life are thrown up by his merciless mattock. A final incision into the core: into all that has made us all that we are. We enter the silent and secret world of the Hadean aeon with trepidation. There is nothing here to be had. Nothing. No, wait! There is not quite nothing. From hellfire comes water. Look! There is water. Not even enough for someone to drown in. But something. And with it, the promise of life. The promise of that yet to come.

'Your turn, Abacus.'

Socrates has finished his task. He's exhausted time and has nowhere to go besides climbing out of this void. To travel back through deep time to the now; to take his place in the present.

He hands me his mattock, and I lend him my arm to haul him out of the knee-deep hole. He's hot and tired, but that obdurate smile staunchly enlivens his face. He reaches down to pick up my spade, and as he does so he spies the loose stone. He snatches it up in his fist.

'Ah! Just what I need!'

'What do you want with that stone?'

'It's a beauty! It's exactly what I was hoping to find. Now down you go and get to work.'

'Why do you want it? It's just a stone.'

‘It fits so perfectly into my hand. And it’s got a nice colour. It’s sharp.’

‘It’s only a stone, for God’s sake.’

‘But now it’s mine.’

‘Looney.’

‘All mine.’

‘Do you even know what type of stone it is?’

‘A gorgeous one.’

‘I mean, do you know what it’s made of?’

‘Stone.’

‘Do you know what sort of stone?’

‘Hard stuff.’

‘I can tell you if you want.’

‘I thought you wanted to study bones not stones.’

‘Yes, I do want to be a doctor. But I like geology too. I study it in my spare time.’

‘What’s the point of studying more than you have to? That’s thankless.’

‘Almost as thankless as memorising the whole of *In Memoriam*, I suppose...’

‘Touché, mon brave.’

‘_’

‘_’

‘So, do you know what it’s made of?’

‘I wish you’d just get on with your spading. I want to be left alone with my stone.’

‘Would you like me to tell you what it’s made of?’

‘Would you like me to prove that it doesn’t exist when you’re not looking at it?’

‘Don’t be a twit.’

‘Well, how do you know that it does exist when you’re not looking at it?’

‘Because it’s a stone.’

‘So?’

‘So, it’s made of stone.’

‘And...?’

‘It’s stone.’

‘That’s not much of an argument.’

‘You’re not much of a philosopher.’

‘Try me.’

‘Is that why the English student wants to go to Edinburgh to study philosophy, so you can argue that a stone isn’t a stone?’

‘That’s some of the reason, yes.’

‘And the rest is...?’

‘It’s a four-year course, there’s cheap beer, and it’s a long way from the rest of you lot. What’s not to like?’

Socrates smiles. He’s enjoying this jousting. He’s enjoying the pleasure of standing together, here in the sunshine – the warmth on our backs, the fatigue in our limbs, the irrelevance of time, the contentment of being – the indulgence of prizing an ordinary stone simply because it annoys me.

He hands me the spade and nods his head, signalling me back to the hole. There’s another false layer of fragmented clay that needs to be spooned from the ground. I stand on the edge of the unfilled grave, casting my eyes on the troubled earth, wondering how deep we must go.

I glance up as I unload my next spadeful, seeing a shadow cast on the grass, sliding towards us as soft and as silent as breeze. It’s Mr Whitmore, coming upon us, slowing and stopping at the foot of the trench, near to where Socrates stands with his stone.

Mr W. That's a nice stone...

Soc. Thank you. It is, isn't it.

Mr W. Where did you find it?

Soc. Down there, in the hole. My navvy gave it to me.

Abac. What's with the stone? It's an ordinary stone...

Soc. Do you know what sort of stone it is, Mr Whitmore?

Mr W. I'd say it is aplite.

Abac. I could have told you that.

Soc. Yes, I agree. I thought it was aplite too.

Abac. No, you didn't. You didn't have a clue. You didn't think it even existed.

Soc. I wish you'd just get on with your work.

Mr W. I didn't know you were interested in geology.

Soc. Yes. I study it in my spare time.

Abac. No, you don't.

Soc. Don't you find this person rather annoying?

Mr W. Yes, I do. William, can you concentrate on your digging...

Abac. I am digging. And please don't call me 'William'.

Mr W. I thought that was your name.

Abac. While we're here can you use our nicknames, please. Everyone else does. All of the time.

Mr W. You want me to call you by your nicknames?

Abac. Yes. You know what they are.

Mr W. I'll do it while we're here, if it makes you happy. But once off this island you're back to 'William'.

Abac. Can you tell us how long we need to dig for? How deep do we need to go?

Mr W. Deep enough to last for a week, covering it over with a spadeful each time.

Abac. Then two-foot should be more than enough. How much crap can we make in a week?

Soc. You produce plenty of crap.

Abac. So do you.

Mr W. Two-foot should be enough. When you've dug out all the loose bits in there, you can stop. But leave the spade to the side.

Abac. What happens if the wind changes direction?

Mr W. It won't. This lat's on the leeward side. The wind only comes off the sea. Besides, it's far enough from the camp. And if everyone covers it up every time, your nose is unlikely to be offended.

Soc. Abacus has got a very sensitive nose. He's a very sensitive boy...

Abac. Shut up, Socrates.

Mr W. When you've finished the lat, you can rig up the rope between these two trees, then fix the tarp over the top.

Abac. Will that stop the wind while I'm having a dump...?

Soc. Can anything stop your wind?

Mr W. It's for the sake of modesty, Abacus. You might not care, but the girls certainly will.

Mr Whitmore turns and departs, crossing the broad bright stretch of burnt-green which spreads like the sea, glistening and rippling, teased by the wind and stroked by the sun. He walks up a gentle rise to the plateau where Pintail and Mash are turfing a campfire, side by side on their knees. Their backs are towards us; they are both looking down, seemingly fused at their hips.

I turn back, plunging the furious spade through the blunt clods lying helpless beneath me. Feeling the hapless lumps of earth yield and resign themselves to the glare of the indefatigable sun. To be sapped of their moisture,

worn and fragmented. To be crumbled into fine granules of soil, fit to be shovelled back onto the shit, to be buried again for an aeon.

Why am I digging a sodding latrine when I could be kneeling down beside Pintail, feeling the rub of her knee against mine, the skin of her upper arm on my elbow, the delicate brush of her hair on my cheek as it's caught in the soft of the breeze. When I could be glancing askance at her face, at her parted lips, at the tip of her tongue protruding from the cage of her teeth, as she concentrates on turfing the grass. When the fragrance of her skin and her hair, tangled up in the love-struck air, could be wafting over towards me. That is where I should be.

I lunge once more at the earth: the slice of my spade stabbing into the hunks, shifting their bulk from a shadowy world into the sharp eye of day. Again and again, scratching the base, even though there is nothing left loose.

'Woah, boy! Steady as she goes!'

'Bloody Mr Whitmore!'

'You can stop digging now. It's all gone.'

'What a bastard!'

'What's eating you, Abacus?'

'Why does it have to be us digging shit?'

'Because it needs to be done.'

'But why is it always us? Always me. Why does he give me the shittiest jobs? Every time, he gives them to me.'

'Do you think he's punishing you on purpose? Do you think he's being unfair?'

‘Yes. No. I don’t know. What a bastard! Why wasn’t I able to swap with Mash? Why couldn’t he let me turf the firepit?’

‘With Pintail?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you think that job would be nicer?’

‘Of course it would.’

‘Because it’s a firepit, or because it’s with Pintail?’

‘Because... because I’m fed up with this shit. I’m fed up of being treated like shit. I’m fed up of being in this miserable place.’

‘Here. Give me your arm. Let me help you up. Throw down your spade. Turn around. Now, what can you see?’

‘What can I see?’

‘Yes, what can you see?’

‘I can see Pintail and Mash kneeling down in the grass, and it’s really pissing me off.’

‘What else can you see?’

‘I can see Mr Whitmore. The back of his head. It looks like he’s walking down to the beach. I expect he’s going in search of the others.’

‘And what else?’

‘What else? There isn’t anything else.’

‘There isn’t anything else you can see?!’

‘Well, of course I can see other stuff.’

‘Like what?’

‘I can see lots of grass. There’s a hill behind us. And over there, that looks like a wood. There’s some sort of meadow, with flowers.’

‘And if you look further?’

‘There’s just sea.’

‘Just sea?’

‘Yes.’

‘And above the sea?’
‘There’s the sky.’
‘Blue sky?’
‘Yes, it’s blue.’
‘And you think this is miserable...?’
‘Well, not exactly miserable...’
‘Intolerable? Unbearable? Wretched?’
‘It could be worse, I suppose.’
‘You mean, it could be raining?’
‘I’m not talking about the sodding weather, Socrates.’
‘O. So it’s not the place that’s miserable. It’s just you. You’re being a miserable git.’
‘He’s always had it in for me. Seriously, Socrates. And bringing me here with Pintail and Mash is just his way of mocking me. Of humiliating me. Of rubbing it in.’
‘You don’t think the reason why we’re all here is something more positive than that?’
‘Not really. No.’
‘That’s a shame.’

Socrates lets go of my shoulders. He lays down the spade beside his mattock and carefully places his stone on its rim. Then he picks up some rope which lies by the tarp. He saunters over towards a squat tree, uncoiling the cord as he goes. He stands in the shade of the canopy, throwing one end round a head-high bough, twisting its tip to fashion a knot which he tests and pulls tight in his grasp. Now he is rambling back towards me, the scuff of his boots on the brittle grass, the fire of the sun on his back. He pays out the rope as he passes the trench, without looking over or speaking to me. He strolls to the base of a taller tree; he squints through its shifting ocean of leaves, as if gauging which branch he should aim for.

I drag my feet through the shin-high grass, feeling the snag of its tangled stems, the rustle and moan of its thirsty shoots as they brush the legs of my jeans. I rest my back against the trunk, knitting my fingers into a cradle. He glances down at the step I have made him, then reassesses his route up the spine. He grips the rope in his teeth, then levers his body into the tree while pressing his palms on my head. I lean back, watching him clutching the bark, feeling his way through the living darkness, searching within it for purchase. He extends his body and raises his arms. I can see his fingers curl over a branch; I can feel the pressure of launch in my palms. Socrates drags his leg over a bough. He shimmies along the yielding limb till he reaches a fork, then he sits up straight, his thighs either side of the spur. He takes the rope from his mouth, drawing it through the awning of leaves until it is straining and taut. He ties a mysterious singular knot, weaving the end through a series of loops, and pulling it fast by its tail. Then he watches and waits as I wade through the sun, the heat and the brightness blinding my vision, as I yank at the rope to make sure it's secure.

I can hear a crackle of breaking twigs as Socrates backs along the rough branch, screened by a patchwork of green. Now the tree shudders, feeling his weight: the sea of leaves in agitation forged by the localised storm. Two feet; two legs; a waist; a belly. I sense him holding on by his hands, straightening his arms till only his fingers are clinging onto the bough.

He lands with a laugh. Together we strike out into the glare, into the furnace of afternoon sun, its lustre glazed on the earth.

I pick up the tarp and we open it out, throwing it over the rope. Then together, in silence, we secretly revel in the sunken splendour of our latrine, now that it's pristine and ready.

We walk around the side of our screen. In front of us, an imperceptible slope leads to a gentle level of plateau in the middle of which Pintail and Mash are laid out, side by side, in the grass, their bodies disguised by the scrub. Mash is raised on one of his elbows, cupping his cheek in his palm. In his other hand he's holding a stem which he's using to tickle Pintail's nose. She raises a lazy hand towards it, brushing its bearded head from her skin. I can hear the silk of her unheard words as she scolds him, shrouding her pleasure.

To their right, the wind-blown grasses and heather point to the beach where we came in to land. I can see an array of bags and boxes stacked at the mouth where a tongue of sand licks at the fibrous plain. Luke is lumbering up the path, tall and thin and painfully slow, heaving a chest on his shoulders. Mr Whitmore follows behind him, and further still the mirage of Bella, seeming to sprout from the dunes.

I look over their heads at the stunning sea, melting and shifting easily, creased with silver and gold. I can smell the salt that is trapped in the breeze; I can taste its brackishness on my tongue. I can feel the purity of the sun, strong on my back, anaesthetising the land. No, this isn't a miserable place. It is vibrant and raw, and rich with beauty. It is host to hidden hoards and bounty that we have yet to explore.