

The Release

Edward Arruns Mulhorn



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'I Hung My Head' words and music by Gordon Sumner
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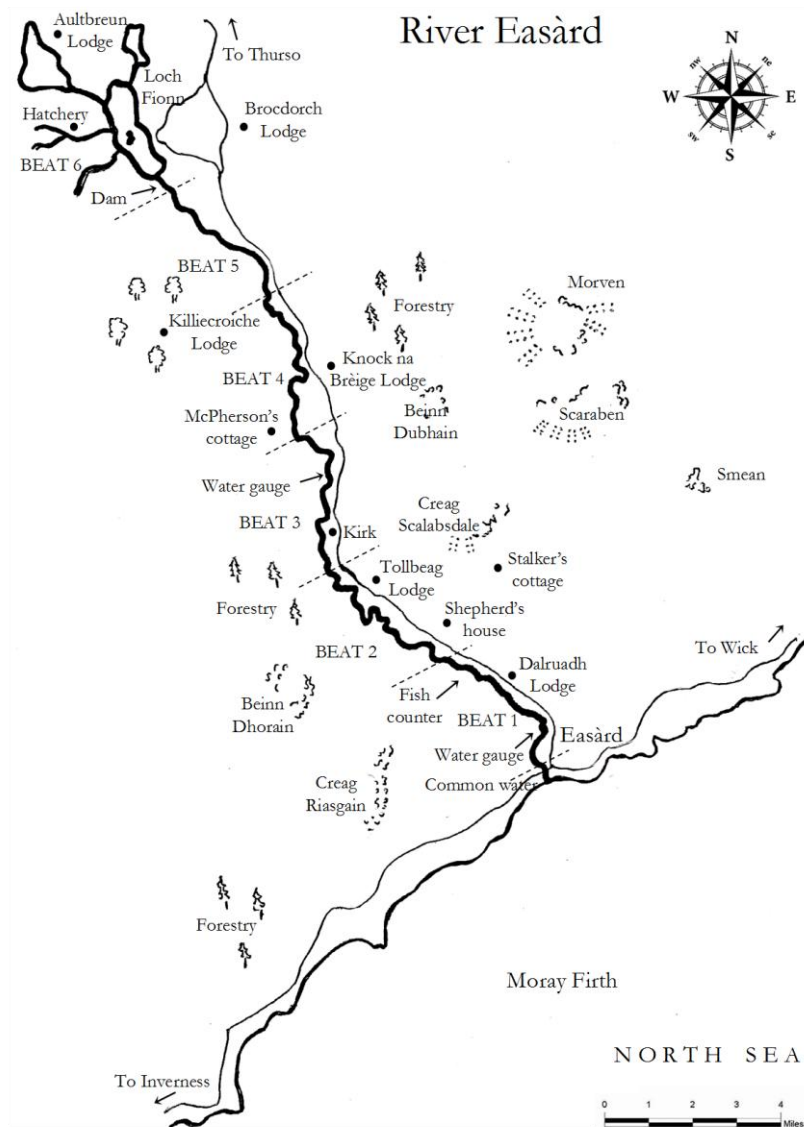
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I kept on running into the salt lands
And that's where they found me, my head in my hands
The sheriff he asked me 'Why had I run'
Then it came to me just what I had done
And all for no reason

I Hung My Head, Sting

River Easàrd



Preface

The Easàrd is a river in north-east Scotland. At its head is Loch Fionn, encircled by low cliffs on three sides. The loch is fed via a series of smaller lochs and burns whose waters cascade into its depths through gullies and waterfalls. At the open side of the loch is a dam from which the current flows south-east. The Easàrd carves a path through a valley, dipping its tongue in the Moray Firth at a town which shares the river's name. Though only twenty-one miles in length, it boasts the finest salmon fishing of all the rivers in Sutherland.

The Easàrd is jointly owned by six estates which line the fringe of the stream. Their lodges nestle in the strath – Brocdorch, Aultbreun, Killiecriche, Knock na Brèige, Tollbeag, and Dalruadh. The owners of these estates comprise the Fishery Board, which oversees the health of the river, and decides when to open the dam's sluice gate to keep its bed from running dry.

The owners let their estates for much of the angling season. For generations a system has been in place dividing the Easàrd into six beats. Anglers fish a new beat each day, covering the river over the week. Beat Six lies beyond the dam – a point which salmon cannot reach – so is popularly known as the Dead Beat. The Common Water below Beat One is tidal, and free for locals to fish.

The estates survive on what they can earn from game, and forestry, and farming. Each employs a disparate crew – a ghillie to find good pools for the anglers, a stalker to tread the hill with the hunters, and a shepherd to care for the flock.

Beat Five

Cold. A coldness clasping the tips of his fingers, piercing the skin and gnawing deep to the bone. Feeling along the back of his hands, pricking his palms with its urgency. Stealing around the hug of his cuff, searching for access within his sleeves. Sinking its icy imprint within him, sucking him dry of his warmth. His face was burnt by the frigid air, by the hollow wind which thrust around him – blasting and gasping in feverish gusts, then dying and fading and falling away, stripping its fury to hostile silence, leaving him bare to the cold.

He looked down. His fingers were red and swollen and raw. Numb and alien stumps of flesh that projected proud from his half-mittened hands, stung and ecstatic with cold. He thrust them into his jacket pockets, feeling the ice of the flimsy lining melting around them, fusing his joints, chilling the marrow within.

He shivered. Beneath the skin of his jacket and waders, he felt the breath of his cooling body – clammy with sweat which stuck about him, sealing him into a frozen posture – slipping away and becoming fainter, as if his heartbeat had died.

Along the rim of his cap, bright droplets of rain clung trembling to the weave of the tweed, tenaciously grasping a moment of light, grappling with life as the wind wound round them, falling like teardrops onto his boots. Beyond them, the span of the idle river – ruffled and furrowed by snatches of breeze, giddy and buoyant and blackened with peat – flowed invisibly while chanting a melody, reflecting the shattered slate-grey of the sky.

The opposite bank, broken and lesioned by the scars of erosion, clothed with clumps of dead grasses and heather, rose to a plateau of sinewy marshland, barren of bushes or form. Starved and drained of texture and colour, it stretched an immeasurable distance before him, then met and merged with the slow feet of slopes, inclining from hills which knelt in coarse homage, lining the path of the strath. Patches of forestry broke their bare visage, close-planted and dense as they speared to the sky. Elsewhere, the destruction of unburied roots, severed from tree-trunks and left to rot in a grey pool of purgatory. Where not subjected to such carnage, the barren knolls fused themselves together, scorched with the blemish of darker heather, with fierce green scabs of sudden grassland, with boils of rock and peaty fissures, cleaved in the spongy earth. Beyond them, extending beyond his vision, relentless waves of resistless hills were stripped bare by the wind and burnt by the sun, till bald and brutal and bleak. The black and cruel façade of Morven rose at their rear: its crest encrusted and dusted with snow which was whipped by the breeze to form an impenetrable shroud.

Within this living wilderness, this vast expanse of endlessness, he stood alone – sunk in a shocked and sodden landscape, bunching his fingers against the cold.

Ross wasn't here. He hadn't come. This was where they had said they would meet; this was where Ross had wanted to fish; this was the time he had set. Yet here he was on his own. He looked up once more, though unexpectant. As if the dot of a human form, a transient speck on this monstrous stage which had witnessed life since life began, might slide into sight for a fraction of time, in all its absurdity.

Nothing.

He looked at his watch for confirmation. He knew Ross wouldn't come now. He had known it since they had parted that morning. He had felt it as he was eating his lunch, while sitting alone in his car. He had felt it again as he trekked through the wasteland; as he took up his station beside the Stall; as the hail blew through and the cold set in. He knew Ross wouldn't appear.

He could picture him now. He knew where he was. He was still in the shelter beside the Wash. They had parted that morning at Kitty Malone. He had come upstream towards the dam, while Ross had gone back to the hut. Ross had gone back; he had lit a fire; he had shed his coat and removed his boots; he had toppled back in an old armchair; he had feasted on Eileen Sutherland's fare. Then he had lolled back and fallen asleep. Ross had fallen asleep. And still he was sleeping, though the fire had long died. He was dreaming of fish from the quiet of his chair, and the world beyond could not wake him.

They had planned that once Ross had finished his lunch, he would drive his car to the bend in the road; he would cut past the marshland and wade through the grass until he came to the Stall. That was the plan they had made. Instead, there was nothing. No car on the road; no person approaching. No motion save for the breeze on the hills, and the deer which blended into the heather, and the snipe which rubbed their wings in the wind. Ross had fallen asleep. Such was the privilege of the few. Of those who owned an estate and the fishing. Of those who employed a man as a ghillie. Of those who could come and go as they pleased. Of those who chose sleeping over

the fishing. Of those who were rich enough not to care. Of men like Ross, who were done with caring, who only looked out for themselves.

He strapped the landing net on his back and stooped to pick up his rod. The Stall was trembling its blue-black waters, nudging seamlessly downstream, spurred by the coarse caress of the breeze into wavelets that broke on the bank. At the corner, he left the lip of the river, climbing a hillock to avoid a marsh which lay waiting greedily in his path. He followed a sheep track which ambled through the tangled matt of scratching heather, and potholes hewn from the peat. Then down to the waterlogged floor of the valley, rounding spongy clods of grass and soaking pools of moss. He re-joined the current at Little Crocan, crossing a plank that was caged with wire, which bridged the span of a burn. As he came to the rocks which lined the stream, he could hear the thrill of the quickening flow: the commotion as it picked up speed, pressed between the rounded boulders, forced through the gully, foaming white, spat with bright freckles of spume. For a moment he stood on the stony shoulder, savouring its agitation, fixated by its noise.

At Bishops he paused and scanned the water, gauging its level against proud rocks whose bald heads punctured the day. He sought the tank for sudden ripples: the land of an insect, the flick of a tail. He followed the contours of the Bend, watching the river scratching at pebbles as it giggled delighted on rounding the corner, then lazily slowed to the flat. The plain fell away and the hills crept forwards, inching close in quiet communion, locking out the light and the wind, their vast sides bulging into the sky. He looked up, feeling their blinded eyes focused

upon him without being seen; their shoulders bearing a mantle of forest, cut with keen channels to chasten fire.

He had come to the stretch that was known as Five Stones, each of which rose out of the river to form a crescent which split the flood and left a swirl in their wakes. The current glided, silken and gilded by a sudden glint of sun on its surface, round the irregular sides of each stone.

He thrust on to Black Brae through the spiny grass, its harsh bristles sharp like pointed needles, scratching his boots and catching his laces, scraping the wax of his coat. From Black Brae onward to Kitty Malone, where they had stood for an hour that morning – where they rose a salmon that did not take – shuffling between the bank and the rocks, casting into the stream.

He was close to his destination now. Between where he stood and the hut at the Wash, only the Sugar Loaf lay in his way. It was luring him to explore its depths, knowing the spring fish paused there for breath before heading up to their spawning grounds where they would give birth and then die.

He stopped and inspected his fly. It would be so easy to flick over the pool. A half-dozen casts and perhaps a strike. The old man lay asleep in the hut. He would not know what he could not see. Five minutes of pleasure to compensate for the hour-long walk and the fierce cold that he had endured as he waited for Ross.

He looked up, into the sky. It was getting late. There were less than two hours before the day fled, before the brightness was bled from the strath, allowing the half-

light to take hold. The half-light, when the ground became blurred. When sight was no longer a sure guide of feet. When firm direction failed to lead. When man could stray in aimless circles, spiralling into unknown.

He hooked the fly back onto his reel and hastened his pace to the Wash. Crouched in the scrub, set back from the bank, a naked hut emerged from the heather. It was painted green but undisguised for being the only regular shape in this huge and shapeless, perfect world.

He trudged on up to the door. He could hear no sound from within. Nor could he sense a hint of life from the blackened depths displayed through the window. He cradled the rod on the hooks in the wall; he unclipped the net so it fell from his back. He stretched out his hand and grasped the handle. He pushed open the door and went in.

Inside the hut was a hollow warmth which swallowed the wind and sapped the light, which led to a stillness, a breathlessness. Two benches lined the wooden walls, and at the end a pot-bellied stove nursed and emitted a lingering heat from the late-embered glow of a fire. On the bench beside him was a discarded jacket, a cap and glasses, a pair of gloves. The remains of sandwiches, the core of an apple, the empty wrapper of a chocolate bar. On the wall was a map depicting Beat Five, which spelt the names of every pool. A picture of salmon, both wild and farmed. A notice politely requesting all anglers to sweep out the shelter and keep it clean.

To the side of the stove, in the burnt-grey shadow, a haughty armchair regarded the fire. And in that armchair sat Ross.

The old man was asleep. His body lay across the chair, his head in the corner of the wing-backed frame, his torso slumped diagonally, his hands in his lap, his legs stretched out – one lain over the shin of the other – a hole in the toe of one sock. His mouth was open, and his breath came easy, filling the room with its sound. His thin white hair was tousled and windswept; his skin was weathered and cracked like leather. Rogue hair protruded from his ears and his nose. His eyes were closed to the world.

The other crept up and stood above him. He could see the tremor of the old man's chest as it matched the ebb and flow of his breath. The occasional twitch of a lazy eye, as he chased his dreams in his sleep.

He went to the stove and opened its door. The hinges creaked and sounded defiance at the unwanted effort of sharing their heat. He reached for the poker and prodded the ashes, enticing the hot coals to shed their grey scales, while rattling the metal against the iron grill.

From behind him the breathing came to a halt. He could hear a wheezing, a moving of feet. The shift of a body, brittle and awkward. A cough as the old man cleared his throat.

– Ah! Gordon Polson!

– Good afternoon, Mr Ross.

– I think I must have fallen asleep. What sort of time would it be?

– It's just past two thirty.

– Two thirty? Goodness me. You should have woken me sooner.

– I was up at the Stall, sir. I walked back down.

- What were you doing up there?
- We were going to meet there.
- Yes, that's right. Well, we won't go there now. It's too far to walk. We'll stay down here for the afternoon.
- As you like, Mr Ross. If you want to go on.
- Yes, I do want to go on. Just a couple more pools. What would you recommend?
- We could try again in Kitty Malone. And Sugar Loaf was looking fishy when I passed it on my way down.
- Sugar Loaf? No, that's tricky casting if there's anything more than a breeze.
- We could go downstream to Gravelly, and then on to Chancellors.
- You know what I would really like to do...?
-
- I'd like a crack at Black Bank. What do you think?
- I suppose there's a chance that a fish might be there...
- Of course there is! Let's grab ourselves a hot-headed grilse. We'll be back in Tollbeag in time for tea!
-
- Now give me a hand getting up!

Polson turned. For the first time since speaking he faced the old man. He laid down the poker and rose from his haunches. He took hold of the limb which was stretched out towards him, clasping the forearm and raising it upwards till the old man stood in the space before him. Ross was the taller man of the two, slightly stooped, with a willowy frame. He laid a hand on Polson's shoulder. His grip was heavy and true.

- Help me to clean up these bits and pieces. I've got to get all this nonsense on!

Polson cleared a space on the bench, placing what was left of the lunch in the tackle bag which lay by the door. He steadied the old man as he backed to the seat, placing his boots by his feet. Then he returned to the pot-bellied stove, shutting its door and closing the vents so the coals would suffocate and expire. He pushed back the armchair and swept down the table, capturing crumbs in his palm.

– What’s it like out there?

– It’s cold, but it isn’t too windy. There have been a few showers, but they’ve mostly blown through.

– And what have we got on the end of our line?

– It’s a Cascade, sir.

– A Cascade? Why must it always be a Cascade?

– They catch fish, Mr Ross.

– They catch fish, but they’re so damned ugly. Why don’t we try something else?

– We could try a different fly, but I think a Cascade would work best.

– McPherson swore by a Willie Gunn. He would tie them beautifully. Orange and yellow with a bunch of black hair, and a strand or two of Krystal Flash. Now he was a ghillie, God rest his soul! He didn’t deserve to die on his own. He knew Willie Gunn – the real Willie Gunn – when they used to fish on the Brora. McPherson was a wily old sod. His flies were things of sheer beauty.

– We’ve a Willie Gunn if you want to try it...

– Or maybe an Alastair...

– As you like...

– I’m pulling your leg, Gordon! Let’s be done! We’ll use your Cascade since you’re so insistent it’s going to land me a fish!

The old man was bending down to his boots, straining to tie the wandering laces and keep them tight on their clips. For a moment, Polson stood and watched, sensing the effort in the arthritic fingers, the latent frustration in the withered frame. Then he knelt in front of the older man. He pulled at the tongue and anchored the laces, drawing them into a bow. Again, they stood up. He handed Ross his waterproof jacket, guiding his arms through the sleeves. He gave him his cap, his gloves, his glasses. Then he opened the door on the day.

Outside, and the bitter wind daggered towards them, gusting and fretting the hoods of their jackets, pressing the cold caress of its lips on the tender flesh of their cheeks. Polson picked up the landing net and strapped it onto his back. He went round to the side where the rod lay cradled, lifting it up and holding it flat, with the butt end pointing before him. Together, in silence, they walked to the stream, more slowly now for being together, hearing through the pocket of squall the chime of the giddy water which flowed through the Wash and slithered over the rocks, lapping into the bank.

They followed the meandering course of the river in the direction that led to the sea. They wound round the bends that were carved through the valley, which were cut through the peat by the force of the current and worn away by the stroke on its skin. By its silken embrace, its intimate kiss, its fondness which led to decay.

- I think it will be a good year. A year to remember...
- In what respect, Mr Ross?
- We caught a lot in the opening week. There were close to fifty on the very first day. That's good for a January.

- The weather was mild. There were lots of anglers...
- Yes, but it shows there are fish in the river. And there are good fishermen who are coming to catch them.
-
- We had just under two thousand salmon last year. I think we should aim to crack that.
- I'll try my best...
- Yes, Gordon, I'm sure you will. Two thousand is the magic number. But don't work our guests too hard. They need to enjoy it as well. You can show them where the fish can be found. You can net their catch; you can better their skills. But they'll only return if they want to return, and what makes them return is the thrill.
- Yes, Mr Ross.
- How many have already come over the counter?
- Bannerman told me five hundred.
- Five hundred already – by early February?! There are fish in the river, and you can catch them. You and your bloody Cascade! Be the ghillie I know that you are.

They had passed Gravelly and its stony beaches which slid into the shallow water, almost orange with peat. Now they traversed a ridge-wrecked bog which lay beside the lazy turns of idle Chancellors. They crossed meshed planks, and followed furrows melted in the yielding earth. They traced sheep tracks in single file, Polson stepping cautiously, turning to the older man to point out potholes, rocks, and swamps which sucked their boots up to the knee. Behind him Ross trod heavily; his breathing hard. He stumbled once, reaching out for Polson's arm as if to break his fall. The ghillie twisted round to see the old man resting on his knees, struggling to find his feet, his visage bright and burnt with toil.

Around one final bend, and now the track before them straightened, leading down towards a stretch of sinuous and glossy liquid gliding past Black Bank. They stopped and stood off twenty yards. Polson checked the fly. Then gingerly they crept across the stones which marked the water's edge. Polson handed Ross his rod.

The old man stripped off line; the reel shrieking as it spun. He dropped the fly and dangled it above the busy, bustling current, watching as it touched the surface, towing out the line. He false cast once, twice; then more line; then again, a softer cast – the rod tip acting like a spring to land the line and then the fly gently near the farther bank. Polson stood close to his side, intently gazing at the flow. The furrowed water round their boots was silver with reflected sky, but that beyond was black like oil, mirroring the sheer peat cliff which rose above it and contained it, guiding it towards the sea.

They both watched as the sliding fly, swimming proud and innocent, was swept round by the steady current into the wavelets of the stream, buoyed by the tension of the line which Ross stripped in by hand.

Two paces down the crunching stone, both men in unison, as one. Ross raised the rod to cast again. And now the sound of the curling line as it broke against the air behind them; the tip for an instant held suspended, then flicked by his wrist to change direction, driven forwards by its own momentum, dropping the dizzy fly in place.

Again, Ross played the line by hand: firming the fly on the liquid film, steering its body between the boils, then stealing it back into the air before it met with the bank.

Two paces down. Another cast. Again, both men, one mind. Mesmerised by nothingness; caught by blind expectancy; ensnared by their intrigue.

They had come to a place in the pool where the peat bank threatened to yield to the stream. Against its harsh and swarthy face, a broken wall of stakes had been hammered to hold the water at bay. To its side lay a clutch of splintered boulders, breaking the force of the sombre river, creating a deeper hole in which a weary creature might lie.

Ross took two further paces down. Now he was wading further out into the cooling crystal current, where the pebbles gave way to the sand. He soft-stepped into the shimmering water, the liquid closing round his shins and nudging to his thighs. Polson did the same. Ross cast again. He fixed his line, feeling the fly as it bobbed on the surface, feeling himself a part of the pool as it closed around him and sucked him in.

Another cast; and then again. Once more. And now they were past the clutch of boulders, where the ledge gave way to bungs of grass which stretched their spikes at the sky. The river shallowed and its raven features reflected the crease of the clouds.

They came from the flood and crossed the pebbles, sitting down on a hump of peat. Delighted, excited, exhausted.

- We should fish it through once again, Mr Ross.
- No. That's me. I'm done for the day.
- I think it would yield us a fish...
- You are welcome to try.

- I think you should do it. Perhaps with a different fly...
- You can humour me, Gordon, but I've had enough. The pleasure is doing it, not how much you do it.
- Then we should go back to the car, sir. It's cold, and soon it will start to get dark.
- Come then! You lead the way.

They rose from their perch, stealing a final glimpse at the flow as it babbled and niggled beside Black Bank. Then they trekked upstream, retracing the steps they had taken less than an hour before. Once they were clear of the boggy ground, they walked side by side on the hip of the bank, glancing towards the enticing waters, raising their gaze to the hills beyond, feeling the majesty and the scale of unbridled nature around them.

- The Fishery Board is meeting later this month. Is there anything you want me to report?
- The river is in pretty good stead, Mr Ross. I've seen nothing untoward.
- No damage – man-made or natural?
- Not that I am aware of.
- And what about trespass?
- What of it?
- It's illegal, you know.
- Yes. I know it is, sir.
- There hasn't been any netting here for more than a decade now. I was thinking of asking the Board to consider cutting down to a single bailiff. Kenny Bannerman could handle it all.
- That would make sense.
- But the other estates have complained about dapping. They say it's been taking place on the loch.
-

- Would you happen to know anything about that?
- It might be anglers fishing the Dead Beat...
- It might be. But there again, it might not. I'm assuming that Bannerman knows friend from foe.
- Do you want me to take any action, sir?
- No, Gordon. I want you to be yourself, that is all. To be true to yourself, and to me.

They had passed the hut which lay by the Wash, and now they were approaching the road. Polson stationed himself by the stile so the old man could steady himself as he climbed. Ross rested a hand on Polson's shoulder, supporting himself on his arm. The clouds had assumed a darker hue as the shielded sun began to set behind the sheltering hills. The heather about them shivered and sighed in readiness for the onset of dusk: for the cold which clutched at their fragile stems, which sank in the earth and shrivelled their roots.

Polson walked to his car, fixing the rod on a set of clips which clasped to the bonnet and roof. He opened the trunk and placed within it the tackle bag and the net. Then he crossed the road and trudged over to Ross. The old man was scanning the brow of the hill, shielding his eyes with his hand. He was searching through empty brown patches of heather, darkened by half-light and blurred by his wind-tears. He was scouring the land, and the life within it, before it shrank from his sight.

- Can I help, Mr Ross?
- Look. Up there on the rise. Can you see?
- What can you see?
- I can see hind.
- How many?

- It's hard to tell. Maybe twenty or thirty. Can you see?
- No. Would you like me to get some binoculars?
- It doesn't matter. But what he was saying is true...
- What who was saying?
- Kilphedir.
- What did he say?
- That there are too many deer. We need to go out and cull some more. To keep their numbers contained.
-
- What's the date today?
- It's the fifth.
- Then there are less than two weeks till the end of the season. After that it's too late.
-
- When are we next on the Dead Beat?
- On Thursday.
- Then I want you to do a favour for me. I want you to talk to Donald Kilphedir. Go up to his cottage and tell him I'll join him. He can come to Tollbeag next Thursday at nine. I'll go up on the hill with him then.
- Are you sure, Mr Ross? It's heavy terrain.
- Yes, I'm sure. That man's a machine. He can track anything that's got legs. He'll find the herd in less than two hours. I tell you, if I were one of those deer, I wouldn't like him on my trail.

Ross turned to face the younger man, as though sizing him up against Kilphedir – one who knew the river's secrets, the other who stalked on the hill. Both the vassals of the old man's estate. Both subject to his will.

Polson nodded and turned away. He opened the door of the old man's car. Again, Ross placed his hand on his arm, facing him squarely, searching his eyes, smiling his

meaning in silence. Then he said goodbye; he started his car; he drove down the hill to follow the river till he came to his lodge at Tollbeag.

Polson stood in the empty cutting. The rain had started once more. He could hear it smacking against his jacket. He could feel its insistence stabbing his shoulders, prodding him, searching for cracks. He turned to face it full on. He could see the threatening curl of the squall as it spilled from a wreath of lumbering cloud – a harsh drape of grey which covered the sky already heavy with dusk. He could feel the wind that was pushing it through, chasing it on to the coast. He brushed his cheek with the back of his hand, lowering his head and hunching his body as he walked back up the road to his car.