

Millar MacLure

HOME COMING

FIRST, THE TREES. Balanced on my suitcase, I sit among the bracken, all juniper about me in the evening wind. Whisking in each other's arms, they have no confidences, only the wind will listen, who says the same thing over and over, the passing of weather. Fronds about my breast, hushed with a sigh (why sigh?) from my throat, turning from wind, bending from sunset. There, divided by trees, an arrangement of epitaphs, church always to the west, under a dying sun. So I sit there, like a child awaking, a fern leaf scalloped on my shoulder, measuring the distance between my feet, far enough for love.

How shall I count the distance? First there is the straight, over an old bog raised by grass and ditch, then the descent to the millpond, then the hill and fields, then the fork, then the farm—the old crossroads house, tipped against the south, the windows a mirror for all who pass by, a ragged poplar, a spring. (Milk cans rattling around the spring on Sunday morning in summer.) Five o'clock now.

Shall I take up my burden, and begin? What does it contain, my present inventory? If everything behind me should burst and flower and fall, what would I have left? A book, by Simenon. Two shirts: one drip-dry, checked, from Liberty; one white. Two singlets, two underpants, blue. Blue as the sky. Two pairs of socks, grey, plain, elastic tops. One necktie, blue-grey stripes. One pair of shoes (9), grey suede. One dressing-case, containing razor, brush, comb, hair-brush, soap, tooth-brush, tooth-paste. (Much attention to the head and face.)

Not a sound. I strike a match, and hold the flame under a fern-leaf. From far beneath the threshold of my pain, I hear the ugly murmur of ravaged leaves and fired grasses, watch the convulsion of the little green branch. It would have died hereafter—but slowly, by millimeters bending under the autumnal blight, but now quickly clenched and black among its buoyant neighbours. *Acte gratuit.* Torture a frond but not a man; be historical, torture a man but not a frond. Imperial and

noble people have always been careful of grass and dogs. I have two miles and a half to walk.

I can see every footprint, after the rain, each particle of that smooth red surface is set soft, wearing the mark of man, the scrawls of partridge, until the sun comes tomorrow to loosen it for the wind, and the edges of that heel-stamp will blur little and little, as this grain shifts and tips and now that, until by afternoon it will be just a round depression, an accident like a ball lightly rained from heaven, or a place where a small-bottomed forest creature, moving from fear to fear, sat to rest, and then a change of sand, a caught wind's breath, and then nothing but the flat ground on which the boreal monody is played.

So then. No-one can trace me. I have shucked off the costume, thrown it in a ditch at the bus-stop where the asphalt ends, and crept out the stage-door, a two-shirt fugitive. At that corner, where shacks full of violent children, and a stallion neighing from a hidden pasture assault my silence and confirm their own adventure, I have gone the other way so many times, put on a tie to confront the world I made, started to cities full of friends and marriages, to ships and companionable waits at foggy airports.

But I have begun to walk: there are tracks to show it. I can read the tracks of horses, infer a gait from the spacing of shoeprints, from the way the caulks have thrown the clay. But the horses are gone, except for a few left (like old permitted boarders) switching flies by backfield fences, ragged in the withers, humble in summer and wild in winter. I need a horse now: I could confront all the past on a horse, looking down his neck on every memory, as if they were straws left from a harvest load, hoof-broken, last year's crop. But I must, as it is, walk to it.

The black spruces are invading the fields I knew, the corner-posts are rotted and canting over, the dam is broken and an uncertain stream trickles among old stumps, long buried and green and now brown.

This happened to a man ten years ago. The road is paved now. The spruces have grown little, but there are more little ones, and those fields have disappeared, behind the bog. The distance is two and one half miles. I drove over it last year in two and one half minutes. I checked the time. I could have done it in less than two minutes, for there is only one curve after the crossroads. I have a powerful car, and the road was empty. Black. Empty.

Let me think now of what is up there on the right, behind the ragged trees, overlooking the remains of the pond, sick-green on the stumps, the water gently

brown, a twig caught on a bend, caught by a leaf. Who broke the twig upstream? anybody up there? there's nothing up there, is there? an abandoned farm. Who broke the twig? An animal. Anyway it bends in the stream, going—no, it's still there. The leaf holds in the grass. There it's going: it swirls out slowly in the slow stream, it's under the bridge, it's gone. It will never get down to the bay, not through that tangled water. But it won't rot, will it? It will stay in a corner in the woods below, an arrangement of a branch, naked, under water. But what will the ice do to it? Destroy. The twig is a witty hieroglyphic. (Make sure that point is clear.)

Up there on the right is a house: double bay-windows, right and left of a never-used-except-for-funerals front door. Never painted, grey, not empty, a family in a corner of it, their backs to the road, I do not want to see anybody. Walk by. They will guess who it is, but no-one will come out. A dog will bark, or a goose run at the weedy fence. It's supper time. Let me think of the old couple who lived there before. She always wore a lace cap, and worried about her health; she was never "well" she said, never well. She died at 94. He died first, 96.

I must simplify this condition, avoid reminiscence, avoid the dangerous human touch, avoid, above all, nostalgia for what I never loved. I am here with a suitcase, heavy on the hill, though it contains only—but I have said what it contains. Shift to the other hand. We have two hands for such burdens but only one brain. We must look to God like a fragile plant with a kind of bulb waving on the top. A plant that walks, a thinking reed? The association takes me to the top of the hill. I have no roots; there is a plant that walks, a tumbleweed, is it? Turning over in the dust.

There is an old half-ton truck in front of the barn. If I were to go in—I can't see anyone watching—the boy would drive me the rest of the way. Suitcase on the back, and not much conversation, he wouldn't know me at all, just his father. Reminiscence again: a dark hard man, one arm bad; caught in the flywheel of a stationary engine. I remember the time it happened. He once killed a dog in his cellar by kicking it to death. He moved here ten years ago: what does he make of those fields which now extend themselves before me, before the turn and the view?

What could anyone make of them? (I move along the level now, abstracted, away from water and its parables, free and empty, no more streams to cross. There was no sign there, no smoke, no dog, no goose, no man.) No mystery in these woods which back the fields, just brush, surveyed. I've never been in them, never will now; big trees maybe, hummocks that are the graves of the first trees, wasps, raspberries, the jagged profile of a woods road, still no wilderness, just the line where

the grass thins out, the oats is short, the stringy roots tangle the harrow, and in front the fields to the fence and the road. These fields were levelled without love or anger; if they grow again to scrub spruce it will be no-one's gesture, no surrender to any wilderness. Just giving up.

I think I think these thoughts. Look left. A big field. Think of ploughing it single-bottomed. Day after day, a long ridge. The reins hang loose around your neck, waving in sharp fall wind, slapping the strong rounded hindquarters of the horses. Stopped for rest, they pick at dead hay on the headlands, and the foam of their chewing against the heavy bits blows back against your face as you turn into the wind, green-brown—rub it off with your free arm, as you watch the furrow, feel the coulter on the gravel, the shrieking complaint of earth which wants to grow little trees, and, drugged by commercial fertilizer, will produce oats or potatoes in a trance.

The fields are behind. I have stopped again, at the foot of the long slope beyond which is the bush screening the fork, and, when I walk around the turn, the farms of my old neighbours, then the hill-top—and the house. I am there already, too soon. Stop now, not stop and think, but stop. Any place in the world is a good place to stop.

He stood there for some time. He left the bus-stop (so I understand) at about 4.15 p.m. He did not get home until 6.00 p.m. He seems to have walked briskly—his suitcase was not heavy—except for a stop on the bridge and this pause, and one other. During these times the constellations moved up out of the eastern darkness, cows were milked and pigs were fed all about him.

This road has been here a long time. Since 1788? Perhaps; I am not sure if it is in Holland's survey. Yet it is only present, certainly not monumental like a Roman road (avoid these analogues). Look at the edge. Notice how the grass creeps on to the shoulder, first thick and green and general, then thinner and thinner, until each little blade stands up like a tiny pen-nib (why should I use that simile?) in the clay, each separated from each by an inch or a little less. I rub my shoe over these, like a man in embarrassment, and they turn over, their little white roots come out, but a print, not a print a scrape, is left. No-one will know. Who would look at a thing like that? Yet here I am, a man standing on the road, going home, moving my feet. Surely nature could record this? The only other thing I could do is blaze a tree, but I have no axe. I have these two shirts, and my shoes are good and strong. I know better than to say anything. I have destroyed two green things on my way, that is the way I move.

I am walking again, no longer ahead of myself, making plans, deciding how to confront my view, but just walking on. I used to know the names of the muscles I am using. My suitcase is in my right hand, which makes me asymmetrical, while bands across my shoulders and my belly compensate to keep me erect. But the imbalance could be deduced, too, from the imprints on the clay. But no-one will follow me, and in any case I have only those two shirts to keep me from perfect poise, from being the untilted axis of my little equinox. I need a rearguard, a swordsman retreating gracefully before the approaching night, looking for a tree at which to make a final stand. . . .

For several minutes I have not thought at all, just listening, recording. The playback will be weak and thin: sounds of nature, recorded on such-and-such an evening, not much. A rustle (rabbit?), a little crackle (well, anything), a crow. Very far off, an aircraft. Strange I do not hear cows bawling.

How much of what is here and now is negative: no this, no that, not here, not now, not at all. This is a no-place, a minimal condition. This landscape, mean and unstately, denies, and I am next to nothing, unaccommodated (except for this suitcase). Walking through the last of these woods, I should have ideas—I could project myself forward again? But there is no need, for I have arrived at the fork, and the settlement is open before me. (How long was that empty part? Lifelong. Caw, said the crow. And caw, said the crow again. He has his intervals too, and his heartbeat is faster than mine.)

On the day I was born, the doctor must have come, with horse and buggy, on the other road, from the north. If I were to die here, they would take me west, to the church. What (or, more precisely, who) comes from the east? My silhouette says traveller. I find myself looked at, over the fence, by a horse. Since I do not stop, he walks inside the fence, beside me. Alone, picking at the edges of the back pasture, he likes company. I know this horse; I was there when he was foaled. He is by Dillington out of a standard-bred mare whose name I have forgotten, and who was no good anyway. He must be fifteen now. Dark bay, white blaze and stockings, no marks on him. Never raced. Why keep him? Sentiment? (Looking at a horse, I can feel the old detachment.) I think not. His owner, even after a decade, cannot quite give up hope of making some money out of him, though there never was any chance of it, hated to give up anything that might, unexpectedly, pay off (you never know, etc.). But the horse is *there*; he is the first living, living thing I have seen this day, neglected, mange in his mane, feet rough, looks as if he had worms, but there he is. Better go over and speak to him, don't remember his name either, if he ever had one.

His head, between his eyes, feels rough and soft over the firm bone that comes down, a long U, thin, a delicate shell. His eyes are hollowing, he is getting old. Making no sound, he accepts the caress, and suddenly I know that he is quiet all over, a little twitch on his shoulder has stopped, a fly on his flank stays unswitched, still he stands. Time goes away. My hand, between his eyes, no longer moves. I cannot see the pulse in his throat. Bone to bone we stand in trance. It is he who breaks it: the fly is too much for him, and I touch him on the shoulder, over the fence, and go back to the road, as he goes back, also, to his grass.

I wave to Harold, on his way to the barn. He waves back, too far away to see who it is, and stands surmising (probably correctly) for a moment and then goes on through the yard. We went to school together, and I haven't seen him closer than that for years. Can't tell what he looks like now, at that distance and under that straw hat.

I am making some connections finally, it seems, however tenuous. Other sentient beings exist. I do not want any of this, though I cannot resist it, but rather to be a shell, a vault of bone, moved up by the tide, a discarded carapace on the passionate shore, half covered by sand, a traveller in the shallows finally unmoved. Then the ice will come down, shelves of it, and press me lower until I am beyond recovery—no little sandy-thighed darling with his plastic shovel, no amateur clam-digger working too high on the beach, no idle sun-worshipper tracing the sand with golden finger will find me then. Deep, deep, I will be, a long time.

Still, we have the moment and the day, and now I am almost there, on the hill. I see that the patch of thistles in the field above the spring is rich and full. From what ancient anarchy do they draw their power? Cut, trampled, ploughed up, flooded with clover, dredged with potatoes, cursed in the sheaf, they return, a violent minority, to that field. Well, that's a landmark. And across the road, a school. I can smell the chalk, the sweaty feet in the gum-rubbers, from here, I think. No more about the school. (I spent eight years in that goddamned school, eight winters of my life, each one at first fearfully, then angrily rendered up, a living sacrifice, acceptable to the Department of Education, my unreasonable service. My God, if I had those years back, to walk, a boy under the sun!)

There is the house. I was born, I think in the room over the left of the front door, at 3 o'clock in the afternoon of July 23, 1917, and wawled and cried as Shakespeare said I would. People born in hospitals cannot look at any private place for this: under a tree, in a river encampment, on a retreat, in a strange town, or in an ancestral house, these are arrangements no more contrived than the settling of a

milkweed nebula. No use in pride: I am the ninety-eighth sheep, the second last before the count expires and the drama begins.

Yet even I (walking fast, shifting the suitcase to the other hand) may find this road (which holds no footprints) the last one in the world.

And what you thought you came for
Is only a shell, a husk of meaning
From which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled
If at all.

Especially now, when only a small measurable space remains, a stretch of clay which could be commanded in a picture painted according to the ordinary laws of perspective. Each of us can come to this point, our walled city in view (turn right, stumble a little), without peril, and stay there, where house, barn and field make up only a remembered landscape, a composition better remembered than seen again. Each of us. Each of whom, pray tell? But we, we are not all in this together. I am alone in this. I have put off—I have kept on putting off until I am naked before these breaking fences, this turf, this crossroads house, in which I took my bodily form.

You expect (you, listener) a climax perhaps? An embrace or a blow? You are deceived. As I walk in the gate, I am, to put it in a certain way, all there, everything in place. My father, living there alone now a little while until he goes away too, for good, comes across the yard, and we shake hands. After a little talk we go into the kitchen and he (so deft, so good at all things, horses and men) cooks the evening meal. For this is a short stay only, and then we will both go. We have put the past behind us—he with some drawing-down of blinds, I with the blinds still up? He and I will never argue about that. We once burned a whole cartload of old photographs, dresses, combs, shawls moth-eaten, pieces of broken furniture, dressing-cases, carpet-bags, in the field north of the brook, and I do not remember looking at his face as they burned. To others, later, he professed a deep attachment to things past, to others he told things he never told me, little connections, a word, a secret, a family joke. I suppose he always thought I knew these things. Or he kept them from me, to keep me free. A man's father has to keep silent a long time, forty years perhaps he has to hold back the words, the great silence of good fathers.

My own words betray me, and I have joined my other, who passed through afterwards. (I like to make everything clear.) Thus, at that time, in that place, I came home.