



# A Single Path

Steve O'Brien

'There exists in the world a single path along which no one can go except you: whither does it lead? Do not ask, go along it.'

Nietzsche

## Prologue

The long afternoon faded. I came to a little stream, no more than a foot across, down between steep banks. Roots had grown out of the crumbling sandstone, making nooks and hollows. I paused to wash my face and drink. As I scooped the water over my head I looked through the drops to see someone silhouetted against the light on the opposite bank. 'Hwat eart thu?' The voice was an urgent bark, obviously questions, but the words were unintelligible. He slid down to stand over me. 'Beleosan?' I looked up but remained blinded by a slinking glare. I went to stand but then he pushed me and I fell against the stones. He squatted and, now that he was down on his haunches, I was able to see him clearly.

This new encounter was no less bizarre than that of three stag dancers earlier. The figure facing me across a foot of clear running water wore a polished helmet of many panels and attached to it were a nose piece and visor that almost totally covered his face. I could see a brown beard below the helmet lappings. He was breathing hard and as he moved I saw that the panels of the helmet were etched with motifs, and some were picked out with gold. He was wearing a blue woollen tunic and red trousers. 'Hwat eart thu?' he repeated in irritation.

'I don't understand you,' I said, shaking my head. I looked down and saw that he was holding a long dagger of glinting steel in his right hand.

He looked up towards the lip of the bank and, clearly exasperated, he hissed 'Ic beon folctoga.' I shook my head again. Then he held out his left hand in a clear gesture that he wanted something. I had no food and clearly money was no use here, so I opened my palm to show the carved acorn. I had been stroking it with my thumb as I walked. He exhaled and I took this as a sign of relief, for he lowered his knife and reached for the nub of polished wood. He held it tight for a second in silence and then astonishingly he began to speak in clear English, 'I am Aelle, and I take you to be the Empty Man.'

## The Twitten Way to Titnore

It was seven o'clock on a blazing Tuesday morning (the last time I checked my watch). I found myself at the foot of a flint-walled twitten near the door of St Mary's church. Long ago I was a chorister there. Back then my father would wait outside to take me back home after Friday singing practice. It was his voice that I always ran to, out there in the dark graveyard. He would lead me home through the unlit alleys.

I had no idea how I had come to stand there. These long Sussex twittens are dark and narrow, and looking down them you often rub your eyes, thinking that you have seen a figure going on ahead at the end of the path, where it breaks out into the light.

Unquestioning and with no sense of purpose, I was untroubled by what had been in the Beforetime. I walked.

I thought I knew Titnore Wood. When I was a boy we went there with buckets to scoop tadpoles from the pond. I was often alone in that wood, far from the road. So it was odd to find the ruined house ahead of me. I had never seen it before. In fact I was sure there had not been a house this far in. But there it was, a fire-blackened house, its roof fallen in, windows open to the wind. The shape was familiar: a house such as a child might draw, one of those sturdy council houses built in the 1950s, picked up and dumped among beeches. I went to the doorway. Inside was all dark with soot. At the back I found a hedged garden with an orchard of old apple trees all leaning sideways. A tall pale blue wooden gate swung at the far end. I went through and found myself once more among outgrown coppices and a track leading away into the west. I listened for sounds beyond my own breathing. A blackbird's challenge up in its thicket was like new silver. And for the first time I realised that I couldn't hear any cars.

The trees went from beech to oak and the smell began to be musky. Titnore is a tiny relic of the great Wealden forest. Yet the wide girth of the trees and the great fallen boughs seemed older still – a truly wild wood, and looking both right and left I saw no end to the trunks, no flash of wire fencing, no glimpse of corn. I went on with nothing behind me. Hours washed over me and still I walked, with the dark tang of earth below and the rushing green canopy above.

As for my journey, I could tell you of some of the nights I slept among the tangled roots and dry boar wallows; of the days pacing alone, but now I have returned the sequence is fast becoming hard to string together. Many of these memories are fading now. Certainly I will not forget those four men I met in the deeps, each coming as twilight fell.

Perhaps it was the day after I entered the forest, I can't exactly recall. The trees were still summery. When the leaf cover broke in the glades the sun gave a bronze heat and the midges rose around my face. I don't think I had eaten. All day I had been dazzled by the alternate flicker of light and dark. Background noises intensified. At first it was mostly the clatter and song of birds, but gradually other intrusions came, echoes of splintering wood coming through the sentinel trunks from the green distance. There were whistles that closely mimicked bird calls but I began to suspect that they were too measured in their answering of each other across both sides of my path. Then, following on the heels of this the skin on my neck began to prickle. Any solitary walk among trees makes you focus, but swiftly I became acutely aware and poised. I felt my eyes widen as I turned to a tapping, chinking sound off to the right.

Over there, by a clearing, pale fractured shapes were moving. The tap-tap beat continued. Drawn to make sense of the fluidity of movement in the foliage I left my path and waded through tall dock leaves. I realise now that I must have been downwind. I drew closer. In a heart-yammering second I saw them: three men, naked, each painted moon-white. They wore masks fashioned from deer skulls and the antlers sparkled as they made a dipping, bowing dance. They were silent, except that each one was playing rib bones between his fingers and the clatter seemed part of a reply to the movement of the others.

I mentioned earlier that the journey had a dreamlike quality and for a moment this first haunting felt like that. But these were not silent phantoms, for as I leaned in to get a better look I heard the three figures grunting as they crouched and paced. Then one of them leapt particularly high and in doing so caught sight of me as he fell. His dark eye in the hollows of his skull mask was like looking down a well.

He ran from the edge of the clearing and was now in full sight. He was short. I caught the hot tang of his sweat. It was running down his thin torso and made streaks in the white paint. Underneath his skin was bronze. In a feint of goring me he bowed his head and thrust his antlers in my direction, then he stood with his legs hunkering and his arms outspread. At his waist was a leather pouch on a cord. Despite an overwhelming desire to run like the wind I began to back off slowly. He continued to stand his ground, his chest heaving. My heels found the path. I never took my eyes off him. His companions were standing further back, half-hidden by holly saplings. Suddenly the one in front reached into his pouch and threw something that fell at my feet. I bent to pick it up. It was a polished carving of an acorn about an inch long. I looked up. At this the painted dancers both shook their bone clappers at me like castanets. Then, without looking back they turned and walked into the trees.

This first astonishment felt like the ring of a bell in every fibre of my limbs. What had I witnessed? As I attempted to take in what had happened some rags of memory came back to me. There are stories of the woods north of Highdown. Voices in the night, a spectral miller who might grind your bones, witch stories and figures made of twigs that sometimes stride out into the corn stubble near Patching. I turned the carved acorn over in my hand as I resumed my journey.

## **Aelle**

'... I take you to be the Empty Man.' His accent had a strong burr.

I told him my name. 'Other than that I cannot say more.' He gave me a long look but I smiled in relief when I saw Aelle sheathing his knife. He undid the chinstrap of his helmet and removed it. Bearded and brown-eyed, he had a solemn face, apparently not made for readily returning a smile.

'This is a were-wood,' he said, wiping his long hair away from his eyes. 'There are spirits here and there are witch houses that come and go.' He looked back up at the sky again and then, reaching out, he hoisted me to my feet. 'Quick now, come.'

Aelle took off at a jog. I followed him as best I could but I am in my mid-fifties and he looked scarcely past thirty, so as we left the glade he already had quite a lead on me. He was holding his helmet by his side and it flashed in the sunset. Mercifully soon Aelle came to a halt and stretched out his arm, indicating to me that I should be quiet. Together we approached a low, small chapel. The trees crowded darkly around it. Bare roots were reaching for the stones of the walls and had set the ten or so gravestones all leaning at different angles. Inside we were met by the smell of mould and cold echoes. The chapel was nearly empty, apart from a rood screen and beyond an altar dressed in a white cloth and simple gold chalice.

However, there were murals on both of the nave walls, angels and devils, and flames in black and ochre and blue. I was breathing hard. Aelle passed his left hand over the paintings. 'What are these?'

I thought for a minute. 'I think they depict the Day of Judgement. The church can't be later than the year 900 but the paintings are probably medieval.'

Aelle gave me a numb look. He opened his right palm. 'I was told that this charm would make speaking between us easy but ...' He shrugged.

I realised what I had said was meaningless to him. His face was genuinely pained, like that of a child trying to comprehend trigonometry. 'It's a very old church,' I said.

Aelle put his hand through his hair. 'There is much I do not understand in this wood, but this house cannot be old, for it wasn't here three days ago!' His voice rang up to the rafters.

'That's ridiculous,' I replied as I sat down on the bare flagstones.

Aelle appeared to ignore me. He ran back up the nave to the heavy door and shut it, which made a deep boom. He returned holding a large black iron key. 'There,' he said. 'It is locked. I think we will be safe.' He sat down near me.

'I have no idea what is going on.' I pulled my jacket close and rested my back against the wall. 'I appear to have walked into a place of hallucinations and riddles. I realise now that you were speaking the ancestor of my own language back there by the stream, but now, by some weird conjuring we can suddenly understand each other.'

Again there was a kind of freezing of Aelle's features as he wrestled with this. It passed in a second and he continued. 'I told you that there are witch-houses. I have been wandering among these trees for months. I have seen how the land opens and stones are thrown up overnight.' He stretched his arm up high. 'Sometimes fortresses and sometimes white palaces. Occasionally spirit people dwell in them and you have to be careful to keep away.'

Aelle's solemn face made it hard to disbelieve him. I could see that he was, at least, telling his truth. But then, with a jolt, I remembered the burnt ruin of a council house at the edge of Titnore. 'I think I have seen such a place.' I said. 'A house just like the one I grew up in.'

He nodded. 'And this stone hall must be one also. Tell me, what kind of people live here?'

I began to gauge my responses into expressions that I thought he might understand. I had a growing assumption about this Aelle, with his Old English and his helmet. As I passed a gravestone outside I had seen the year 1836 inscribed on it. I might have a hard job explaining that. 'A church is a prayer house for the people who are called Christians.'

At this he laughed quietly. 'I have heard that there are Christians among the Britons and that their God is a lamb.' He reached inside his tunic and showed me a hammer-shaped amulet on a leather thong around his neck. 'Here is Thunor's hammer. Do you think He will keep me safer than the lamb of the Christians?'

'I don't know,' I replied. 'How did you come to be lost?'

He thought for a moment then he replied in a steady manner. 'Each spring the Britons appear from the north and the west. When we see their dragon banners and hear their fleet cavalry we know we must fight to keep what we have won from them.'

'In April the chieftain Angenmaer came to me saying that the Britons had taken eleven of his tribe as slaves, so we went into the Weald to track the British war band. But outside Horsa's encampment they ambushed us and my two brothers were killed. For my shame I found myself running through the black forest with a gang of canny Britons at my back. Many times they have nearly chased me down, but I always manage to elude them. The Britons sing well. Their voices are high and ring through the forest at night. I cannot understand their language but I hear their battle songs and their sad laments. I know they sing of the hope of my death and of their grief for their loved ones that I have put to the

knife. But I will never let them catch me. I must try to get home to the coast and my people. Yet ...' Aelle trailed off and looked into the dark end of the church.

'Yet?' I asked.

He turned back to me. And this time there was a kind of pleading fear in his eyes. 'In this wood all is spirit. I rarely see the Britons who pursue me ... but they are changed.'

'How?'

'They are not the same as they were that day near Horsa's camp. They are taller. Their mail shirts are blinding silver. Their swords can cut moonlight. They run like wolves.' Aelle paused. He cocked his head at some sound outside but then he relaxed again. 'It is only the wind,' he said.

Silence fell between us as I considered my next response. 'If what you say is true, that you are being hunted, why then were you also looking for me?'

For the first time Aelle smiled. 'I was told that my path would cross with that of the Empty Man.'

'It seems a very grand title. I'm not sure I ...'

Aelle held his hand up to silence me. 'One night a voice out there spoke to me as I lay down. It was a voice from a long, long way off, as if calling across a valley. An old man's voice. It said that there is a man here alone and his past has been poured out so he does not know why he is walking. The voice said that I should look out for this man, the Empty Man who does not recall his name. He would possess a hand-wrought charm to make all tongues sound the same. When I found him I was told to tell him two wyrds.'

'But I told you my name,' I protested.

'You didn't,' he replied and his face was grave. 'Your mouth moved on nothing and then you said "I cannot say more."'

This time it was my turn to feel a blankness behind my eyes. Aelle was right, I had come to a state where I had very little notion of my life before walking the twitten on that July morning. 'What are these wyrds?' I snapped back to the sound of my own voice, and the odd feeling of reaching back for memories and finding only minnow flashes was gone again.

Aelle smoothed his beard. 'You must never leave the path until you reach the Hanging Tree. You must ask the little deer to sing.' When he was finished he stood up. 'I looked blindly into the night and listened for a long time but the voice spoke no more.'

'I'll try to remember those wyrds, as you call them. But I still don't see what they mean for me, or for you.'

'For me,' he said, fastening his helmet, 'this meeting means the fulfilment of an obligation. I think I have been bound by this task. Perhaps now I can find a way back to the hill that looks down on my farm and the sea. As for you, if my reckoning is right, these wyrds mean that you are a story woven into this forest.' He shouldered his leather bag. 'You must fill yourself again, and I must go.'

Together we went to the church door. 'What should I do now?' I asked.

'Sleep here,' he replied.

He turned the key and opened the door slightly. 'All seems quiet,' he said. He held out the carved acorn. Behind the gold-picked visor of his helmet his eyes showed that childlike fear again. He shivered. 'Sometimes I am afraid that I am also a ghost here,' he said quietly.

I took the acorn.

'Far gesund,' he said and went quickly into the dusk.



## The Young Deer

The morning was slightly cooler. Leaf shadows raced over my bare arms. No sounds had roused me in the night and my sleep had been dreamless and black. Before I left the church I drank holy water from the font by the door. I caught sight of my own reflection – a man with wild hair like a woodwose. When I sprinkled the water through it my fingers caught on leaves and pieces of twig in the knotted tangles. What a sight I must be, I thought. As I began out on the path I looked at my sandals and filthy trousers as if seeing them for the first time. I looked like a man who sleeps in shop doorways. Or like a man who wanders and cannot recall his own name.

Aelle's wyrds were certainly fresh on my lips. Saying them over allowed me to grasp the tail of a memory from the night before and as I trekked onward I held it tight in case it escaped. As for my name, whenever I tried to pronounce it I found that my tongue would not fold around it and the word remained a smudged abstraction somewhere deep inside me. The one vivid recollection I kept as I went through the day was of Aelle himself. From the twitten to Titnore Wood (how many days ago had I left?) I would have climbed Highdown. Two trackways cross the ancient hillfort and below the springy downland turf it is said that a king is buried – Aelle the first Bretwalda. With his supple, throaty Old English and his Thunor's hammer pendant, how could I have begun to relate any of this to him? It was hard enough to tell myself that I had sat and spoken with a fifth-century Saxon.

Hunger is not abstract. A cold tolling pain was growing in my belly. A little rain came on at midday. To my right and left the trees grew ever more massive and twisted. Giant oaks; they reminded me of Dürer's drawings of the primeval forests of German imagination. Once when I paused to rest three wild boar broke cover in front of me and crashed back into the undergrowth. I was growing to wonder at this path. Who had made it, and, for the first time, fired by Aelle's wyrds, where did it lead?

There were figures too in the woods, more so now that I was deeper in. I came across an affable young man in a short blue jacket and wide white trousers standing in a hollow. His whiskers were thick around his cheeks but his chin was cleanly shaven. He had a thick leather belt and two flintlock pistols hung on either side. I spoke to him for a while. In the strong accent of Sussex that you don't hear much nowadays he explained he was a 'Preventive Man' and was looking out for smugglers. 'There's been a night landing at Shoreham, see,' he said as he drew on a clay pipe. When we parted he gave me some hard cheese and a heel of bread. As I ate the welcome gift of food I pondered that, although he was undoubtedly a man from around the year 1800, if he were one Aelle's 'spirits' he was certainly a fleshy and robust one. Later, in the mid-afternoon I looked across a place where two trees had fallen and let in the light. Looking back at me boldly stood a wolf, yellow-eyed and grizzled silver around the chops. Here was a creature of the unfathomable wilds and it reminded me that I was now very far from Titnore. As the wolf held my gaze I realised I was not even carrying a stick. I was not about to turn my back on the creature. I could see the sun filtering through the tips of its grey pelt. Yet there came a call, whether animal or human I could not say, and at a flick the wolf bolted away. For a while I walked on shivering legs and turned around frequently to check I was not being stalked.

As the balance of afternoon tipped towards evening my path began to twist around and through great grey hunching rocks. The trees were very close to the path, leaning over it in places. Since Aelle had given me his gnomic wyrds I had felt a sense of anticipation that





had not been with me at the beginning. My path ran through a cleft in the stones. I turned a corner and the claws of a bleached bough stretched out between me and the sun. I halted, looking up at the lightning-struck form. It was a dead, cruel shape, like a reaching hag, all spikes and shattered bark. Like a pendulum, a noose of coarse rope swung in the breeze.

The tree creaked and settled. I waited under the lengthening shadow of the terrible pale limb. The chough, chough cries of two magpies signalled the imminence of my next meeting. I saw the youth tie his horse some distance back in the wood. He came towards me with his head down, only looking up as he stepped through the bracken. Blue eyes, nearly obscured by a long fringe. His hair close-shaved around the sides. He wore a saffron-coloured shirt with wide sleeves, and his legs were bare. In the crook of one arm he carried a sword with a large ring on the pommel. He looked me up and down and I held out the acorn. He hefted it in his free hand then closed his fingers around it. 'Empty Man, Empty Man,' he said, 'I am dreaming you.'

We sat down against the rocks, with the stark tree in front of us. His accent had the soft treading cadences of the West of Ireland but much amplified. He told me he was called Oísín. Drawing his knees up to his chin he picked at the lacings of his buckskin shoes. I did not even attempt to tell him my name as I feared it would dissolve on my teeth before I could say it, so I asked him why he thought he was dreaming me. He cast his arm around and said 'My life has been all visions since that morning in the mist on the hillside when I followed Niamh, for she was like the morning star. Together we rode over the fences of the night sky to her country.'

'Oísín,' I said, and in the act of pronouncing his name as correctly as I could, my inklings opened to certainty and another scrap of the past came back to me. 'I think I know your story. I remember, when I was a child, on Sunday evenings my grandfather would read the tale of the Fianna and the poet among them who left his eight of companions to go into the otherworld with a great princess.'

'Three days I spent with Niamh' he said. 'Three nights, with her arms around me, in secret dark.'

'But you grew homesick and wished to return to your friends and the world of men. Niamh gave you her swan-necked horse Embarr and begged you to come back soon.'

Oísín laughed. 'And that is why I know that I am dreaming you!' He spat on his palm and shook my hand like the men do in Kerry when they have made a deal over cattle. 'How else could you have my story and tell it as something given to you long ago as a child?'

'I also know now that this tree does not belong here,' I said. 'It is in a song my grandfather used to sing about the rebels in 1798. They were hanged at crossroads and left to rot.'

The boy looked up at the noose. 'Your phrases are confusing but that's a dreadful thing.' 'What's more, my grandfather told me that the name Oísín means 'the little deer' and for that reason I must ask you to sing me a song.'

'Ah, that's what I was told when I slept in the saddle against Embarr's flank. We were in the stars and a voice called to me in cold heights. It said that The Empty Man needs a song.' He looked at me with his young wide blue stare. 'Do you know if a person can dream within a dream?'

'I can't say,' I replied. 'What song do you have for me?'

Oísín closed his eyes and leaned his head back. His voice was full of the curls and pauses of Gaelic intonation, but, with the carved acorn in his hands, his words came in oddly coiled English.

‘Now what will we do for timber,  
with the last of the woods laid low?  
There’s no talk of Kilcash or its household  
and its bell will be struck no more ...’

Immediately I was thrown back nearly half a century to a small living room and my grandfather singing the same song. I realised also that the ballad *Caoine Cill Cháis* (for that was its name) was all out of kilter for Oísín. It is an 18th-century lament for the final fall of the old Gaelic aristocracy, hundreds of years after the time of the Fianna. Nevertheless, I didn’t think that it would be of any use mentioning this to him. It seemed to me that I was hearing two versions in my ears at the same time: that of the young man by my side and also my grandfather’s rendition, both high-strung and desolate, ‘Cad a dhéanfimid feasta gan adhmad.’ The song led me back to the room with its 1960s wallpaper. There must have been some party, for the room was full of aunts and cousins. But I had a sudden pang that someone was missing. Before I had time to grasp the memory Oísín finished.

He opened his eyes and looked down in the shy manner I had seen many times in singers from the Aran Islands and Galway. I thanked him, ‘Well, I must be on my way through this dream,’ he said. ‘I hope to wake on the hillside and see my friends around me once more, shaking off the dew.’

The bridle of the horse Embarr jingled as it dipped its head. I wished Oísín good luck and secretly hoped that he was indeed folded in a dream because I knew well how tragically his story would end. As he turned to leave he looked back at me. ‘Oh, there is one more thing. I was bidden to speak this gaes over your head – at midnight you must wait in the grove of the Long Chair.’

## Hauntings

The path narrowed as I walked through the darkness. The grass and tall nettles were wet and my trousers were stuck to my legs. I kept my elbows high for fear of being stung. A smuggler’s moon rode above me and I presumed that it was the grove that I could see, all lit up, ahead.

The track had become a harrowing way. Fretful cries and whispers snagged at my nerves. Frequently I stopped to try and locate the rustling and muttering. I looked into the maw of the trees and saw snatches of profiles picked in silver. Although night had fallen the forest was awake.

I had wished to be away from the hanging tree as quickly as possible. My growing notion was that the wood itself was purposely trying to disorientate me. The Oísín I had met was the one of my childhood imagination but, even given the surreal visitation, he could not have been the legendary poet of the Fianna. His appearance at the foot of the stark tree and the Jacobite lament were all wrong. Or perhaps I was being given something. Had I remembered his words correctly, ‘Do you know if a person can dream within a dream?’

\*\*\*

Later there was a fallen tree. It lay across my track. Sitting on it there was a figure with its back towards me. I approached slowly. It was hunched and cowered. Breathing hard I drew close. At first there was no sign that the figure, whether man or woman, was aware of my presence. When I felt its soft hand reaching for mine I did not recoil. The shoulders trembled. I realised it was weeping. I put my free hand on its shoulder and this seemed to cause a kind of loosening of its grief. I cannot say how long I stood there as the figure wept, but finally it squeezed my hand and rose. Without turning it passed into the forest.

### **The Parting Glass**

The grove was spangled in hoary light as if everything had been touched with frost. I had seen it from a long way off but when I stood at the edge it was hard to believe that it was a July night. Here my path ended, giving out on a wide circle of sentinel trees. A thick curtain of shrubs and bushes was woven between them. The moon was poised in its highest moment. It picked out a long, wooden seat of polished oak at the centre of the clearing. I went to it. I ran my palm along the curved back and, in touching its dark sheen, I found that I knew the piece. It was a church pew, carved at the sides, with leaves and acorns. As a child I had sat among the shavings and watched it being carved.

My father spent many evenings in St Mary's church; a moonlighting job, he called it. He made the pew from start to finish. I used to go with him, carrying his long spirit level with its air bubble trapped in the glass vial. He sharpened his chisels on a blank whetstone and bent over the wood. Nick by nick, the leaves were given depth on the panels until I could trace the relief of the oak leaves with my fingers. In his moonlighting he had wrought magic.

Now in the glimmering I sat on the pew and waited. For a moment, when he stepped from the ring of trees, my father looked as if he had been cast in silver. To see him again was airily happy, like freewheeling downhill. He wore his usual expression, somewhere between a smile and a frown. All seemed absolutely commonplace as he came and sat down beside me. He was the same age as when he carved the oak leaves, about thirty-five. His hair was long around his collar. His suit and tie were cut in a 1970s style. When he had lit a cigarette he spoke. 'Steven, your hair is grey.' As ever, his tone was matter of fact and even. But the effect for me was as if I had broken from deep water into clear air. He had given me back my name, the two syllables I have carried since birth. In doing so he opened the sluices of memory. At last I could fathom my past.

'And you are dead,' I replied. 'I kissed your cold forehead.'

'Was that a long time ago?' I noticed now that he was holding a glass of whiskey.

'Perhaps a week. It's hard to say. I don't know how long I've been wandering.'

My father drew on his cigarette and considered this. 'Do you recall me saying that when the time came you should fetch me a sinning priest to say the words over me, and then go and forget me forever?'

'We did that,' I said, 'or at least the first part.'

He smiled more broadly at this. 'You know, of course,' he said, 'that you have thrown up this forest.'

'What do you mean?' I asked.

'Just that. All this has been crafted by you. All the hauntings and these great trees are yours. I told you to forget me, not yourself.'

'But I have been lost here.'

'I would put it that you have be-wildered yourself.' He swirled the whisky in his glass. 'You sent yourself into the wilds of your own making.'

'I never knew you to be so profound,' I said.

'I've changed.' He flicked ash off his suit trousers. 'Do you have the acorn?' I opened my left hand and it was there. He took it. 'Well,' he said, 'It's time for me to take that path.' He pointed across the clearing.

'Can't you stay for a while?' I asked. 'It's good to be sitting with you and talking like this, after ...'

'After what?' he asked.

I considered my reply carefully. 'You were confused. On those Sunday mornings in the care home often you were far away and you spoke to —'

'— to the dead,' he interrupted. He took a sip of his whiskey, then he faced me. 'Steven, I have to leave now.'

'Where are you going?' I heard the cold desolation in my voice.

'Words will not work to tell you rightly where I am bound. But if I say that I am following a white stag into the west you will get a hint of it at least.' With that my father stood up and took his leave of me with a smile. As he crossed the clearing I heard him singing.

**'But since it falls unto my lot  
that I should rise and you should not  
I'll gently rise and softly call  
Goodnight and God be with you all.'**

Although he was folded quickly into the night his voice hearkened back to me for a long while.

\*\*\*

I have come from the trees. Since the last day of July I have walked in the green. I know now that time ticks differently in that wood, for I have returned to the chimes of autumn. There has been rain. Rosehips are spiking the hedgerows and the honey light is slanting low. Perhaps testimony is a form of journeying.

.....

**Steven O'Brien**