

Hollows

by Juliet Robinson

A gloaming light was building, not a single cloud smudged the gradually lightening sky, it was empty, hollow and vast. No birds flew in this void, none drifted on the wing, above the torn-up ground.

Tam's tiredness hurt, it'd kept him awake. Not a moment's rest, not a moment's escape. But the night had passed, taking its inky black with it and now dawn was here. It had started as a low burst of light on the horizon. So bright, it had hurt his eyes, like the flares before an attack. Then the creeping light had advanced laying claim to the land, an army on the march. Though this army didn't bleed or break or cry for its mother.

Maybe it wasn't the tiredness that hurt. Maybe it was the hole in his side, where shrapnel had hurried through him. Maybe it was the twisted and broken leg, with the foot that faced entirely the wrong way, as if it had decided enough was enough and it was going home, with or without Tam. Pain has a colour Tam realised, and it wasn't red. He had imagined it might be, but it was brown and burrowing, and it sought out the deeper places which were yellow and orange, warm like autumn leaves or cut and dried hay.

Silence, it stretched all the way up to the hollow sky. Not a sound. Where had this quiet come from. The world isn't a silent place. Its all noise, birds, wind, leaves rustling, the far-off hum of a tractor working its way across a field, people talking, footsteps ringing on cobbles, the caw of a crow. Not silence, the world isn't silent. But beneath this empty sky sound was missing. M.I.A

Tam had a pencil, he had paper - Eilidh's letter. He could write on the reverse, send her words home with his, tangled together like lovers in the sheets. Funny how hard it was to get the pencil and letter from his pocket. He drifted, losing himself in the silence, which seemed to be fading at the edges, blurring, though that could have been him he supposed. And then there was the finding of words, for here and now they wouldn't come, his mind was a fog. He slept, drifting with the red and orange colours. When he woke he took his numb fingers and forced them to scribe words upon the soft paper. Paper that had been white and crisp, but to reach Tam it had passed through many hands, and then he had constantly been picking at the letter, reading it over and over, hearing Eilidh's voice as he read. Just her words, her voice and him.

The starkness of the light was wearing out. A gradual fading, a leeching of substance. The horizon was drawing in, though the sky continued onwards, upwards and forever.

There was noise, a gentle murmur, slowly filling the vacuum, but distant, far away, somewhere else.

What do you say to someone who knows every part of you when these might be your last words? He couldn't bring himself to fill this letter with goodbyes.

'Eilidh, you wouldn't believe the skies here. Unbroken, no hills bite into them, they start from the flats of the fields and soar upwards. Its rich land, fenland, divided and controlled by canals and ditches. Crops grow tall here, animal's fat. Not like home, where the sheep cling to the hillsides in feral weather, and the peat water washes brown down to the ocean. I don't know if I like this land. It isn't home. But the greater part of not liking it is that you aren't here. You aren't under the same sky, you're beneath another. And I can see you there. I know you there and I know myself there...'

Tam stopped writing.

The noise was deepening. Voices, not the crack of gunfire, not the screaming of incoming shells. He couldn't make out the words or the language, no way to know if the approaching talkers were friend or foe. He could cry out, call for help. Perhaps it would come, or perhaps the faces that would peer down at him in his crater wouldn't be friends. He was beyond war, he was no threat now, his body was a twisted mess, but would they deliver mercy and if so what sort? A bullet to put the man out of his misery or a stretcher to see if he could be put back together again.

'Eilidh, I know who I am when I am under the same sky as you. I miss that. I miss you. I miss us.'

A dirt covered face appeared at the edge of Tam's hole. Tired eyes considered him. Voices, words, all of it blurring at the edges.

The sky was vast and open.

Tam held out the letter.