

Archibald and the White Rabbit

In the scraggy hills up beyond the last of the houses of Maryhill, many years ago, he had gone hunting with a friend, a mentor, an older boy named Fraser, who had a face like an underdone pork-chop and thick, low-set ears. It had been Fraser's father's old Great War gun, a Luger 9mm P08 pistol which he'd captured from a dead Hun and which somehow, along with a box of ammunition, he had managed to hang onto, and which now had been taken without permission from the back-cupboard and loaded while the master of the house had been hard at work in the fire and light of the Clydebank shipyards.

The two lads had spent the whole day tramping through the scrubland which formed a kind of march between city and country, aiming at, and consistently missing, squirrels, sparrows and even the trunks of great centenarian beech trees, and to assuage their mutual sense of incompetence had taken instead to shooting discarded, rusty cans off the tops of old tree-stumps, and as the sun began to sink towards the charcoal humpbacks of Dumbarton, their sense of failure and anti-climax rolled like a filled iron barrel between them, a black weight which crushed their backs like the spines of the ricket cronies of the single-ends.

At length, as they entered a clearing, Archie spotted what he thought was a woman's white fur hat, but which then shifted of its own volition and proved that it was not a haunted hat by producing ears, snout and tail. Fraser had been carrying the pistol all day; given that it belonged to his father and that he knew how to load and fire it, Archie had not even thought of raising any objection to the arrangement; but his friend had gone behind some bushes for a pee and though already he had returned, now at last, Archie had the gun in his hands. Quickly, he levelled the long barrel along the line of his left arm and aligned his sights. Curled his finger around the trigger. The white rabbit turned to face him. But then he did nothing. Time passed. Both hunter and prey had frozen. Archie glanced across at his mentor, who was fastening himself up. Archie's heart was pounding. He felt suddenly light-headed and sweat dripped from his brow onto the wood of the gun-butt. He dared not budge. Saying nothing, in one, quick movement from behind, Fraser reached across and grabbed the barrel of the gun, pulled the heavy gun tight against Archie's right shoulder, almost without looking aimed at the bulkiest part of the rabbit's body and pulled back the massive, stiff trigger.

The beast was still gazing at Archie when the bullet hit. The recoil threw both boys backwards into the trunk of a solitary oak tree, while the Luger, having found its living target for the first time in a decade, spun into the air and landed heavily, some fifteen feet to their right. Fraser sank to his knees, his eyes filling with tears and he buried his face in his hands and quietly began to sob. Archie left his friend, partly because he wasn't sure whether the boy was crying from pain or from having just killed an animal quite thoughtlessly, partly because his own right shoulder was beginning to throb and he wasn't at all certain whether or not he would be able to move it ever again, and partly because the back of his head felt like it was swaying. But mainly, he left because once the movement, the chain of events, had begun, he'd felt somehow incapable of stopping it. And that scared him, the feeling that he had no more control over the scheme

of things than had the bullet or the trigger or the beast. So instead of comforting his friend, he walked slowly over to the dying rabbit.

He felt as though he was moving through a glue dream, as though out here in the marches of Glasgow, everything happened differently. The angles, the sounds, the light, even. As he reached the rabbit's body, he saw that the red, setting sun was reflected in its eyes and that its legs were twitching spasmodically as though it was practising for some lunatic Strathspey. He smelled blood and knelt down. The blood was trickling from the rabbit's left side. He reached out and touched the stream with his index finger, and allowed the warm, arterial liquid to pump softly onto his skin and to form a pool in his palm. Abruptly, in mid-inhalation, the rabbit stopped breathing and its eyes glazed over. Archie gazed at his palm and then into the rabbit's eyes, for what seemed like minutes, and then he formed his hand into a cone, lifted the cone, tipped back his head and in a single movement, drank the warm blood. In the opaque density of the rabbit's soul, Archie had seen himself, seventy years on.