

## **In Green Waves / Ruairidh MacLean**

*This tale of appetites and silence artfully charts an entire lifetime, from conception to death, without seeming either rushed or glib.* - John F. Buckley, Contest Judge

Cormac was conceived in the heather on a Sunday. With a cloth laid upon it, there is no bed softer. Finbarr MacDonald fucked Ellie Campbell on such a bed, and she snarled at the thistle burs that poked worse than Finbarr dared. She laughed, though, when the bells rang in the kirk:

“What a fucking sin!”

And Finbarr laughed too—but when she grew round like a hill, the church had its revenge and wedded them to their frowns for three sinless years.

When she was fat with Cormac, Ellie ate like a horse. Apples and oats, not cooked but a plain brose of water and salt and the apples mashed in like punishment. Raw oats and apples, stalk and seeds, and salt-sour as brine.

The oats were grown in the valley below the heather. When the hills blushed purple and were full of forgetful Christians, the crop blew like green waves. When Finbarr had weakened and beached onto his back, those fields spoke the words of the earth to her. Hush they said, and she could never think of a more intelligent thing to say.

The apples came to the island from beyond the Minch. Good apples, sweet apples. Finbarr brought them all the way across the channel, to make up for running away there in the first place, and the second place, and the third and the fourth. Ellie had always liked sweet apples, and Cormac craved them sweeter still. She ate nothing but apples and brose for Sundays without counting—anything else made her sick like the devil.

So whatever Cormac was made of, it was mostly to be found in apples and oats and the body of his mother. He gained nothing from the insides of his father’s head, because all of his opinions died in a shipwreck before Cormac could get to know about them. When he wondered why, his mother would just repeat the incantation of the earth.

“Hush. Hush,” she’d say. It was her spell against every eventuality.

When Cormac turned his ankle on the hillside. When Cormac got the strap at school for lying. When Cormac asked if he was a bastard, and if his father was really dead and if the minister really heard the voice of God.

“Hush. Hush,” she’d chant, because unlike the minister, she had heard the voice of God and this was all God had to say.

When she told the words of the spell, he felt something warm in his stomach. It was the ghost of the apple seeds and the corn husks in his body, remembering the sound of the earth. Even so, eventually he grew tired of the quiet. When Cormac was seventeen years old he enlisted.

Cormac MacDonald did not know how to shoot, shooting was for stalkers and friends of the laird. But he did know how to use a spyglass, and to make a rod from almost nothing, and to read the sky and the ground and the secret word of the earth that means silence. Like a lot of such boys from the Hebrides he was told to admit to eighteen and made a scout. He fought in the Empire’s war with the Germans for three very long years. In all that time he killed three men that might have been Germans, although he shot at dozens of them, five times without trying to miss.

Every time he shot he felt the seeds in his belly twist like a knife, but he knew the spell to silence them.

“Hush,” he’d say, and turn invisible—so quiet even God could not find him. That is how he could kill those men who might have been Germans, and with each life the seeds grew heavier until no spell could silence them. That was when God found him on reconnaissance west of Flanders and sent a bullet to make him quiet. It hit him in the stomach, and all the seeds inside him leaked away.

While he was recovering in hospital, Cormac became hungry—but he could eat nothing. They gave him bread and eggs but his stomach had been mashed to pieces and everything tasted of bullets. He prayed for God to let him die, but he lived for a whole year. In the spring he saw an orchard from his hospital bed, not far from where he was shot. The apple trees were full of white blossoms, and as he lay there, he watched as the wind tore their petals free and the branches swayed, like they were lapping at the sky. There was a scent, and he knew it. It made him hungry again.

Another year later fifteen hundred boys would return to the island after the Great War. You could not see them when they came, they were invisible and stepped lightly and spoke the word of God. Ellie looked for them from the heather on a coarse blanket. When the tears came, she watched the green waves below, and listened for the voice of the earth.



Ruairidh MacLean is the London born son of a Dominican and a Scot. His short story “Grief” was recently published in the Kingston Ripple. He has a substack called Capture the Flag where he shares life writing and thoughts about culture.