

## The W.H. Murray Literary Prize 2003

### THE SECOND SIGHT

By P.J. Biggar

Hamlet: Do you see nothing there?

Queen: Nothing at all, yet all that is I see.

(Hamlet III; iv; 132-31)

CONSCIOUSNESS returned slowly.

A strange calm had descended on the mountains in the darkest hours and he had finally slept a drugged, fitful sleep. Now, over the rough meadows where his tent was pitched, snipe were drumming mysteriously in the half light. For a few moments he felt young and expectant, then memory of where he was returned with the nagging discomfort in his abdomen. Perhaps it was just because he had been so much on his own these last few days, but surely the pain was getting worse? It nagged him constantly. He could feel weakness gaining on him. He shifted uneasily in his sleeping bag, trying to find comfort, but the pain followed his motions. And yet the specialist had said he would probably have 18 months and he had barely had nine so far. The word 'probably' caused uneasiness. They couldn't be certain could they? No, not about the time, only about the outcome. He smiled wryly and shifted again, but it was no use, without using drugs he would get no further peace. He caught sight of the whisky flask in the corner of the tent. Why not? And yet he didn't want to. Drink didn't fit with this time of day. Truth to tell he had barely wanted a dram the night before and it hadn't tasted good - not like it used to - but he'd had a drop to give him an appetite. Without food he'd be finished.

Struggling free of the tent he lurched uncomfortably to the boulders nearby and sat down.

The breeze was just starting to pick up again, disturbing the layers of cloud hanging over the hillsides. Winter had gone early, but there were still some big snow patches in the coire. He looked up as a pair of Ravens tumbled out of the clouds and a single distant call came down to him. He had always loved these birds, sometimes his only companion for hours on end on buttress and ridge. He had never found them remotely sinister. He imitated their harsh call and waved an ironic hand.

"Poor bastards," he muttered to himself. "Just like the rest of us, trying to live."

As the breeze shifted the clouds, warm shafts of sunlight came through making the myriad dewdrops sparkle on the spiders' webs. Away down in the valley, smoke rose from dwellings by the river and a small boat moved imperceptibly over the surface of the sea-loch on its round from one orange buoy to the next.

The Primus stove roared among the stones and the water began to steam. Mechanically, because he had always done so, he measured out the oats and the salt for the porridge, set the pan on the stove and stirred it before he sank back onto his boulder with his mug of tea. Now that he had escaped the solitude and darkness of night, the discomfort in his stomach seemed slightly less, but each little activity left

him feeling tired. He stretched backwards until his body found a comfortable position and gazed upwards.

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Dr. Jenkins stared morosely out of the surgery window while Sergeant MacPhail's monotonous voice droned on and on. It was always the same at this time of year. The Sergeant would appear with some trumpery complaint when all he really wanted was to talk. He claimed he was afflicted with the second sight and had forebodings of disasters. Outside, the sun was shining and the doctor, sensing an empty waiting-room, was keen to be away to the river. In the bar last night there had been reports of an early run.

"And I'll tell you another thing Dr. Jenkins," MacPhail pronounced prophetically. "There will be more work for the Mountain Rescue Team before very long."

"Do you think so?"

MacPhail regarded him as a missionary might have glared upon an unconverted heathen in darkest Africa. "It is not a question of thinking." He said in tones of gentle reproof. "You just wait and see. This condition is a curse, Dr. Jenkins. Within a week, maybe less, we shall be carrying a man from the hill and," his voice sank to a gloomy whisper, "there will be no life left in him."

This was too much for Dr. Jenkins. "Now, come, come Roddy," he said kindly. "You mustn't let your mind dwell on such gloomy thoughts. People are born and die every day, you know. I think perhaps you are a little depressed. I'll write you a prescription. It's the time of year, you know. We're all run down after the Winter."

He reached for his pad. Dammit all! Why couldn't the man just get drunk like the rest of the village?

Sergeant MacPhail received the prescription with a wan smile and rose to take his leave. The doctor was a good man and he tried to help, but he didn't understand.

As the Sergeant's heavy tread retreated down the passage, the doctor felt his spirits rise. He opened a drawer and took out a wallet of salmon flies. He was deep in contemplation of the size and colour for a falling water when a gentle knock came at the door and Nurse Duncan, the midwife who doubled as receptionist, came in. "That poor man," she said sympathetically.

"Been telling you too, eh?" "He sees such dreadful things."

"He sees nothing but what you and I see, Morag," the doctor grunted. "It's all in the mind - the man's depressed. It's this awful Winter we've had, nothing but rain and gales. You mark my words, a few weeks of sunshine and MacPhail will be off after the poachers and not a care in the world."

Nurse Duncan kept her own counsel. The doctor was a kind man, but although he had been in the village for 27 years, he was an incomer and didn't understand

everything. She herself was an incomer, but from the islands and she knew all about the second sight.

"It may be as you say, Doctor," she said gently. "I've just had Mrs Paterson on the telephone. She says her husband is not at all well and has taken to his bed."

The doctor sighed and closed his fly wallet. "I'll call at once," he said.

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He turned to look back. The tent was now barely visible at the edge of the meadows by the jumble of boulders. It had been an effort to pack his bag and turn up the hill once more. He had been tempted to get his mat from the tent and lie in the sun looking back down the valley, but he wanted to keep going. He had a feeling that time was not on his side. A tune kept repeating itself sonorously in his mind, it began with deep chords, then a scatter of bright high notes like shining jewels was thrown over the rich, dark fabric of the rhythm which was slow and sad and marched at a steady pace. With a last look down at the tent nestling securely in the coire, he shouldered his pack. It seemed unusually heavy and yet each day he had been leaving more and more behind. Now all the sack contained was a map and compass, a tattered scarf, a pair of gloves, his waterproofs, some bread and cheese and a flask of hot, sweet tea.

It was a strange ambition this, to climb all the higher peaks in one's own country. In fact, he had always been rather contemptuous of those who espoused it. He himself had been a genuine mountaineer and looked down on mere 'peak baggers'. It had never seemed to matter a jot to him whether he had climbed them all or not. And yet after he had been to the specialist and learned the truth, he had reckoned up the number of hills he had climbed and been surprised to find that he had only 23 left. Faced with a finite time, it seemed better to choose some possibly realisable goal and try to achieve it. Then, it had seemed a good idea. Elise, his second wife, had been all in favour and she had even accompanied him on the first few excursions. Now, nearing the end of the round, he wasn't so sure. Surely this was mere selfishness? What good did it do? Suppose he got to the final summit, so what? The goal was a common one nowadays - vulgar even - surely he could have done something with the last bit of his life which actually helped other people? But what? It took a special kind of character to do things for other people and he had never been any good at it. He hated raising money for good causes. Part of him distrusted the motives of those who did. He had resisted the idea of getting his last few ascents 'sponsored'. He didn't want a picture in the local paper or half a minute on local radio. He felt, in some ways, very much alone. He suspected that Elise was already making plans for a future which did not contain him. And why not? She was an attractive woman. Like him, she had a family by a previous marriage. His own son was in Canada, his daughter in Australia. He usually heard from them at Christmas.

The sun was now dispersing the cloud round the coire rim. Wearily, placing his feet with care, he moved up the long slope towards the col. The ground was steep, loose and awkward. Sweat started to run down his forehead. Tiny droplets fell on to the lichen patterned rocks. His mind was acute and lucid and yet his body was losing the fight. He found himself pausing more often and leaning heavily on his ski-poles. Occasionally, he felt his heart lurch painfully before resuming its steady rhythm. He forced himself to breathe deeply but each step was becoming an effort. It reminded

him of the Alps. He looked up. Not too far now to the col. There the going would be easier and only a gentle ridge remained to the summit. The sun was shining strongly now, its heat reflected by the rock. With exhaustion gaining on him, he moved slowly across the moss covered screes. Sighting an outcrop of rock, he made for it. Sinking down on a patch of dry grass under a convenient boulder he found shade. He let his head rest on his sack and looked out over the deep coire. Before long he was asleep.

Liberated from pain and anxiety he was wandering in great valleys topped by towering snow peaks. At night he rested by crackling aromatic fires and conversed with wise companions. His dreams were full of trees in blossom and gentle showers of rain. In the mornings they would go on in an unhurried way, penetrating farther into this strange country. It might have been a place or a state of mind, he never could decide.

"Excuse me! Excuse me!" A hand was shaking his shoulder. The sun had gone behind clouds and the breeze felt decidedly chill. A young man, really no more than a youth, was bending over him looking pale and concerned. He wore faded jeans, dirty trainers and a red tracksuit top. He had no pack.

"What's the problem?"

"It's my girlfriend, she's stuck!"

"Where?"

The young man gestured towards the far side of the col where a long easy rock ridge led up from the dam on the far side of the mountain. He blabbered out his story, but it hardly needed telling. The girl had failed to make the last step up at the first time of asking. The boy was ahead. When he found she wasn't following, he went back. By this time she had had a good look at the drop and become unnerved. He couldn't talk her up and, of course, he had no rope.

"She saw a dead sheep at the bottom, ken. I think it sort of frightened her.

"What's her name?"

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At the third call a timid cry came up to him. The place was almost a photocopy of the one he had imagined. The difficulties short, the holds perfect, the ledges broad and covered with bilberry leaves.

If only the boy hadn't got too far ahead she might not have noticed the long drop to the coire floor. She was facing in to the rock, gripping a huge flake, fingers white.

"Are you the Rescue?"

"No. But your companion's gone for them."

"Will he be long?"

"A couple of hours."

"Oh, God!"

"Sarah, why not sit down and have a cup of tea?"

"I can't!"

"Of course you can."

Gently, he coaxed her into letting go of the flake and taking his arm. She was shaking. She relaxed slightly when she turned away from the rock and saw how broad the ledge really was. He got her to sit down with her back to the mountain and look out over the peaceful valley below.

She had straight blonde hair which covered much of her face, an athletic figure, and she wore pink shell-suit trousers, a pale blue tee shirt and a pair of cheap walking boots. She had no pack, but she carried a cagoule of sorts tied round her waist. From her voice he knew she was English. As soon as she lowered herself shakily onto the ground she began to cry, dabbing ineffectually at her eyes with scraps of tissue. He felt in his pocket and produced a large handkerchief.

"It's clean."

She blew her nose loudly. He rummaged in his sack and got out the flask. He was glad, now, that he'd taken the trouble to brew up that morning. He handed her a cup. She almost spilt it but recovered herself. For the first time she half smiled.

"Were you just out for the day?"

She nodded ruefully and smiled again.

"I'm afraid I'm being a terrible nuisance."

"The only problem was not bringing a rope. It used to say in all the old guide books, 'A rope should be carried unless it is certain not to be needed'. It's good advice."

"We didn't even have a guide book. Darryl got directions from some blokes in the pub last night. It was my fault, I shouldn't have let him bring me up this way. But he was so keen and it was a nice day..."

"I know."

She was looking better now. Her voice was firmer and the colour had come back to her cheeks. He handed her a piece of cheese.

"You know," he said gently, "looking at you, I'd say you could make those moves up there no bother at all with a bit of encouragement. You're fit looking and I'll bet there's nothing wrong with your sense of balance."

"I got scared and started shaking. There's a sheep..." Anxiety showed in her face and her lip started to tremble.

"Yes, I know," he said quickly. "But I expect it was mainly because, the first time, you had no one with you. And then when Darryl came back he couldn't really understand the problem, told you it was easy? Not to make a fuss?"

"Well, he did rather. He meant well, but I kept looking down till I couldn't move. I was sort of paralysed."

"Suppose we did it together?" He could see her shrink back. "I could even give you some protection."

"How?"

"I've got a short length of strong cord. Look, it's the draw cord for my rucksack. It used to be a sling - that's a piece of climbing equipment. You're pretty thin, if I tie this round your waist there'll be just enough to put round my wrist. What d'you think? Should we give it a try?" He could sense that she wanted to, but needed a few moments for the desire to grow into the necessary determination. Looking up, he could see that in a few minutes the sun would come through the light clouds. He poured more tea and let her drink in silence. He felt exhausted and longed to be on his own again, but he struggled hard to overcome his impatience. She seemed a sensible girl. He liked her. She'd only been slightly unnerved. Distant memories of early days in the Lakeland Fells with Janet, his first wife, drifted back fleetingly, but that was in another age.

He could feel her tense up as he tied a bowline round her waist.

"Try to breathe deeply," he said. His own breathing felt none too good, shallow and at times painful. There wasn't really enough cord. But on the most awkward section, he knew that she only had to make two upward steps on slightly rounded rock and her outstretched hand could grasp a satisfying spike. He paused, the looped cord cutting into his flesh, and looked down. She had made one of the high steps and was on the narrow ledge. The next move was crucial. The wind blew her hair in her eyes. Below, steep rocks fell to the stony coire. A fine place.

"One more move, Sarah, then you're safe!" His chest was painful. He wished she'd get on with it then he could sit and rest for a while. She looked up and tried to smile. He could sense the dryness in her mouth. Her hands scrabbled amongst the heather roots. Through the thin umbilical he could feel that she was shaking. Watching her carefully he tried to gauge just the right moment to pull her smoothly upwards.

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Dr. Jenkins replaced the sheet. He washed his hands methodically and then sat at his desk to write the appropriate official form. In the doctor's lounge where a fire was burning, Nurse Duncan was dispensing tea. Sergeant MacPhail was drinking whisky, he had the telephone in his hand. The young people sat next to each other on the settee.

Nurse Duncan had inclined at first to be severe. ("You young people are not wise to go to the hill!"). But she had soon melted at their obvious distress.

"He was so kind and gentle," Sarah kept repeating. "It was all my fault!" Young Darryl avowed.

Sergeant MacPhail put down his glass and shook his head. "I'm afraid it couldn't be prevented," he said mournfully. "It had been going to end that way since the beginning of Time." His expression was more peaceful now.

"Roddy, you mustn't say such dreadful things," Nurse Duncan admonished him. "You will be frightening our young friends and they have been frightened enough."

The doctor entered the room quietly. "Well now," he said. "It seems that the immediate cause of death was a massive heart attack but," he went on hurriedly, sensing the young couple's contrition, "the deceased was a very ill man. Of course, I haven't carried out a full examination, but it's pretty clear he was suffering from the last stages of bowel cancer."

"The poor man," Nurse Duncan's voice was full of sympathy.

"You could say that, Morag," the doctor said slowly. "But after all, he obviously chose to spend his last days doing something he was fond of, and, at the very end, he was able to do something useful. How many of us are so lucky? Have you any word yet of who he was, Roddy?"