

A Most Splendid End

by Jack Eustace

The Scene opens. See the fields now: the lambs are all dead. Crows are coming down; there is a chorus of wing-beats above the moors and squinting in the fog beholds a shape slouching off into the gloom. Vast and hollow, quivering and driven, it moves like rolling stone, towers over the cattle who bray at its passage, and drags a lamb in one hand. The others are dead and gouged. Why does it take this one up into the mountain, painting a slick red path through the long grasses? Questions slither at the back of your skull but the fog is rolling down the crags and grasping the wet slopes and stones and you. have no time. There's a something up the mountain. Some beast in the hills, killing the sheep. You do not contemplate what it might be. Necessity is in the moment: you concern yourself with what it's doing. Back to the house: you grab that gun no one uses. Fidget. Fumble. Sniff the powder and you blink and the sting is in your eyes. A shooting will happen today, you realise. Isn't that funny? "Ain't it a *hoot*?" some voice in your throat croaks.

Hat on. Out the door. The fields roll on upwards into the clouds and the red road curves like a rising snake. You hammer up the new path. The grasses tickle your neck and make a long fence at your side. Mist is condensing on your cheeks. Oh the path is so wet and it squelches with the red. The smell is inside your head: petrichor married to a copper tang and the crows scream in delight over and over and over again behind you. Some follow you. Prophet birds, they shadow your ascent. The air grows thick in the grey and the crags claw black and thrifty in the murky wind. You see them as shapes in the cloud, contorted like ill faces and malformed lumpy daemons in the mist. They shriek and you crumple. But they're but hollow stones and it's the crows down in the fields, celebrating the feast.

Gun on a strap. Two hands grasp the stones and you climb the knives. The red is faded and dripping but the trail is warm. It smells like a butcher shop. How did such a huge something haul its grand bulk up these stones? Should you question what you're hunting? "Probably," you say. Should you rethink your approach? "Most likely," you affirm. So why do you follow the beast? "I don't know." And it is a great and noble truth to spur you up this mountain.

Gasping to clamber over the top of the crags. You stop. Stare. The plateau levels out into stony nothing. It jaggedly swoops into the dark without reason or wit. And you see it some way away, still dragging the lamb: the promethean something moving slow and fat into the dark. It seems to be maybe man. Or man-like. You edge over the top: it is moving away from you; its dry and grey back lurching further and further into the dim. Stumpy legs. Long arms. The lamb's eyes seem to meet yours despite the stretch of land. And then into the cloud.

For a while all flesh and stone is still. The nine-foot hairless thing is ahead: the wind is gone and you hear laborious breathing rattle the hills. You've never been this far up the mountain: father's father always said 'no'. Made laws on wood and built the beams of the house with them. Men cannot go up the slopes and into the evercloud. "There are gods up there," he would wheeze to you. "Watching. Hiding."

"Why are they hiding?"

"Because," the gnarled man would say. "It's unnerving!" He seemed to find that woefully funny. Tend the cattle and stay below the clouds. One law for one life. Broken law and broken life. Couplets: it's all very intricate and ethereal. You move forward now: into the eldritch fog. And the clouds congeal like soft rocks and it's all pressed in about you. So many swirling shapes claw at the skin of the empty evening. Or is it morning? This far up the world, is there even a difference? On high above men and sheep, does the sky turn right?

Your foot hits a stone. An old and carved thing. A lock. Baleful and cracked it lies, and you look across the plateau. The plains are split asunder: see the abyss lying dark and scabby over the grey wet rocks. Holy folk built a door into the earth, long ago. The stones are broken and the door of the mountain is open. Something clawed up. Out of the mountain. Stopped watching. You try to think in longer sentences. But the air. It's getting thick now. Should be thin. Up a mountain. No. Not the air. Heavy shadows.

It calls out in the gloom.

The land bucks and sways, the mountain shuddering violently to the left. The world upends itself and you see the sky. The clouds burst. Some titan has punched the clouds and sent the fog rolling out like a vast grey ripple. Eyes wide. Irises like drops of oil. There is a crag far across the plateau, spindly and terrible above even the mountain. You see the lumpy something up there, straddling the too-thin spire and the sun is rising and burning the land and the lamb is held aloft and seared by the light and the something bellows and –

Crack!

Lamb skull breaks on rock with a wet crunch. It's only a lamb but you scream. You're running and screaming. The gun is blaring buckshot. Men's steel barely dents the something. You're close to the spire now and the sun is going pale and sick. Something of momentous significance is occurring here on the highlands above your tiny home. From this crevice atop the world, something is reaching out to claw at the flesh of the planet. Around the globe, cities and men and women and beasts are shuddering at the sick sun, but only you see what does it.

The something discards the lamb and lets the blood run into the stones. *Thump thump*. The heart of the mountain is beating. Shakes your feet, nearly knocks you over.

You climb the crag, and the rock is orange. A violent stain on the grey lands. About you the mountain is falling, sinking into vast depths. The sun is a brilliant white searchlight that cuts your soul in two. Your fingers bleed. Or maybe it's the blood of the lamb. Hot pain in the depths of your muscles. You scabble up the stone like a drowning spider. Haul. Reach. Strain. Up and over.

You look up.

And the something is hunched over itself, contorting and spinning in its infinite and terrible gyration. Once massive and lumpy, you see its inner self evaporating into the air, flesh sinking in around a lithe and sinewy form. Burning in its own flesh, its head snaps up. And you see forever in its eyes. And you understand how terrible eternity is. You don't attempt to rationalise the beast. You drop the toy-gun. Its face is almost human as it towers above you, so you talk. Whispers. "You took its life."

It hisses. "*Life.*"

"A baby lamb. Why?"

"*Why.*"

Teeth grit. There are tears, somewhere. The reason is gone. "What are you?"

“*You*,” it says, tasting the word. The last note is dragged out and strangled. Its mouth is crammed with too many teeth and no lips lock the words. “*Why*,” it repeats, looking away. The mountain is slowly falling on one side, the rocks dragged up into the air. The world is breaking. The thing gasps and its spine curves back with a crack. Two grey pinions snap out of its body and they darken the land. The wings. Spun of cracked glass and thin like paper. “*Why?*” it muses, finally grinning. It looks at you and gives an answer: “*You*” and then raises a hand to the splitting sky and says “*Life*.”

It snaps two fingers. A human gesture, to snap fingers. Not a thing of gods. But it snaps them anyway. Does a human thing and a godlike action ensues. They click and the lowlands detonate.

A roaring dirge for the dead lambs: apocalyptic fire races across the world. It smashes through oceans and bends cloud with its passing. The sun has gone black but the flames illuminate the husks of nations. Mountains throw their peaks up in woe and tectonic plates scream to flee from each other. New hills and fires are born as oceans heave into the air and valleys become lakes. There’s stone in the sky and wind beneath the land. It stands before you, surveying the carnage. You wonder. You think. You despair. You ask between the retching and the sobbing “Is there a reason for all this?”

“*This*,” it says, and looks out at the ruin of the earth.

“I don’t understand,” you plead. “What’s *happening?*”

“*Happening*,” it echoes.

“Do you speak any damn thing other than the last word I say?”

“*Say*,” it gargles, turning on you. And you suddenly see how tall and horned it is. The lamb’s blood makes a crimson breast down its grey torso. There are worlds within that blood, swimming and falling in a red sky. The horizon blinks in a brilliant surge of power and you see them all: all the dust-ball worlds cavorting in the space between droplets. There’s a smile. It reaches. Something pops. All colour in the world sinks to grey: the flames and clouds and the turning black sun. You see your heart in the air before you. And it bleeds as the lamb did and the creature changes as it did with the last death. Jaw cracks. It rolls teeth in its mouth. As you hit your knees, it stoops tenderly to hold you up.

“Softly now,” it croons as the world ends. “What’s happening is beyond you. *This* is beyond you. You don’t understand because you don’t *have* to understand. Why ought you? Not a drop of reason could make you alter an iota of what lies before you.” It sighs, very human. “This is happening for no reason other than it is. That’s all you need to know, and all you are worthy of knowing.

Great and powerful things are going to happen now. Momentous, terrific things.” It pauses, thoughtful and still. Then it looks to you and says “Not much of these things shall you know. But take comfort in that they, these holy and glorious events, are the last thing you *do* know.” It smiles in a fatherly way as the world collapses around you. “Give thanks: this is a most splendid end.”

The sky went black and heavy then. The celestial curtain fell and the lights went out. As my scene ended, I saw the lamb-killer thrust off into the air. It spun grandly, like a dandelion in the wind. It waited in the side-dark until the interval was to end and the show resume. And I slept backstage.