

Starve Acre

Also by Andrew Michael Hurley

The Loney
Devil's Day

Starve Acre

Andrew Michael Hurley

JOHN MURRAY

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For Glenn and Paula

‘That is a quiet place –
That house in the trees with the shady lawn.’
‘– If, child, you knew what there goes on
You would not call it a quiet place.
Why, a phantom abides there, the last of its race,
And a brain spins there till dawn.’

Thomas Hardy, ‘The House of Silence’

The Raker-of-Mud
The Hot-Footed-One.
Jolly-Night-Drunk.
Earth-on-the-Run.

Piece-o-the-Dark.
Lugs-in-the-Hay
The Owd Duke-o-March.
The Jester-o-May

Twitch-in-the-Bracken
Dandelion Jack
Eyes-all-a-startle
Marker-of-Tracks

Earth-Thumper.
Witch-Puppet.
Lurker-at-Dusk
'Tis part of his game
To vary his name.

'The Hare', a folk song

Part One

Overnight, snow had fallen thickly again in Croftendale and now in the morning the fells on the other side of the valley were pure white against the sky. Further down, where the sun had not yet reached, the wood by the beck was steeped in shadow and would stay cold all day. The freezing mist that was twined between the leafless beech and birch had already driven a hungry fox to seek food elsewhere. A line of deep paw prints came out of the gloom and into the pearly light that washed over the drifts on this side of the dale. Yet the animal seemed to have changed direction abruptly; startled into a hollow or a ditch by the folk out shooting nearby – men from Micklebrow, probably, who'd walked over the moor to take advantage of the wide empty canvas on which the grouse and pheasants were as bright as streaks of paint. The sound of shotguns and whistles doubled in air that was uncannily still and

expectant after the blizzard. The storm had lasted for hours and the extent of its fury was marked by icy cornices blown over the dry-stone walls. They were wild jagged crests, like those of a sea surge breaking on inadequate defences.

So the winter went on. Adding to itself day by day. Making the houses in the dale seem even more remote from one another than usual.

None of the farmers had been out yet with a plough and on the road by Starve Acre the snow cleared the evening before had frozen solid. All along the verges it was piled like crumbled pieces of cumulus.

From his study, Richard Willoughby heard another volley of gunfire and watched the rooks burst from the ash trees outside the window. They scattered in a mess of wings and curses and flapped away to the field across the lane. For days now, they had gone foraging in the frosted hummocks there out of desperation and had found little or nothing in the way of sustenance.

It seemed to Richard that February simply refused to leave the dale. He wished that it would and soon. There was something about being able to say that it was March. Something in the name that suggested

energetic purpose and the onward movement of things. A time to work. A time to shoulder the yoke. There were lines of poetry about the early spring that he thought he should like to learn as reassurances that the world would turn green again. On a day like this, it was easy to have doubts. Everything was starving and puny. Everything was waiting, just as he was.

The rooks spun in the sky, their calls cracking on the frozen air and, as he watched them, Richard felt a swelling sensation in his head – something akin to the start of a migraine.

He blamed himself for getting distracted. When he was in the study, he was normally so attentive to his work (devoid of family photographs, it was his oubliette), but Ewan could find him in the strangest of ways.

The rooks reminded him of the paper birds he'd once made in the small hours when the boy had been frightened and restless. And how, when the birds had been folded into shape, he'd told stories with them and Ewan had eventually gone, his big eyes closing in much needed sleep.

Richard left the sentence he'd been mulling over half typed, moved to the armchair next to the bookshelves

and switched on the radio. One of the Brandenburg Concertos was in full flow. He put on his headphones and turned up the volume until the strings and horns were distorted, trying to lose himself in the noise and banish Ewan to the dark hole from which he had emerged. If he had to be absent, then why couldn't he remain so? A blank could be coped with, just as a man might become used to a missing hand or foot and improvise a way of living until it became habit and habit a kind of normality.

After the funeral at the end of the previous summer, Richard's tactic, just as it was now, had been to work as hard as he could – so that when the new academic year began he'd turned apian, darting from one thing to another but giving each new task his full devotion.

Perhaps he had been naïve to expect people not to treat him any differently but their insistence on doing so became frustrating and his colleagues in History had quickly learned that if they approached him with a look of sympathy he would avoid them.

He had never been pitied before. He found the attention unbearable. Can't stop, he'd say, or, running late. And if they persisted anyway, walking with him across campus, then he ensured that conversation

turned to some work-related matter. Work was all he talked about. Work was all he did. Before lectures, he would ensconce himself in the depths of the library and return after he'd finished teaching for the day. He'd attend every meeting, even those that didn't directly concern him. He'd come in early to prep; he'd stay late for tutorials with his Masters students.

It was unsustainable, and he'd known that before long it would be noted. And then anxious discussions would be had and the wheels would turn and a smiling face would invite him into an office and nudge him towards the sabbatical he ought to have taken years before.

'It'll give you the opportunity to really concentrate on your research, Richard. Take whatever time you need. Just come back to us refreshed.'

Of course, he knew that they were thinking of themselves rather than him. Shunt him out now and they could avoid all the difficulties and embarrassments that would become manifest when the tidal wave of grief finally crashed on Dr Willoughby and he drowned in the middle of a lecture on Persepolis or Lascaux.

Responsibility for getting him to take some leave had devolved to Stella Wicklow, who had received her

doctorate the same year as him but had had a great deal more ambition and risen to head of department.

‘Look,’ she said. ‘Think of them doing Juliette a favour rather than you an injustice. I’m sure she’d appreciate you being at home at the moment, wouldn’t she?’

At first that had been true, but not now.

When Richard took off the headphones he could hear Juliette crying softly again in the room above. He was determined to let her after what she’d said.



From the scullery he picked up his wellingtons, and from the cupboard under the stairs he collected the butane lantern and the matches, shaking the box to make sure there were some left. Then, dressed in his university scarf and the tweed coat Juliette had bought him one Christmas, he closed the front door behind him and went down the driveway, leaving bootprints a foot deep.

The shooters had gone home with their illicit bags of game, and the living birds had returned to the sky: a curlew softly lamenting, three buzzards banking mutely over the fells. In the wintertime there was often a profound quietness in the dale, especially up here on the edge of the moor. The lane that ran past the house

– the top road, as it was known – had no other function than to connect one lonely place with another: Micklebrow with Stythwaite, which sat two miles from the house along the vale, the roofs and chimneys bundled around the church tower.

Across the lane was the field – his field, it was still strange to say – which sloped down to the wood and the beck. This little plot of land was one of the things that had attracted Juliette to Starve Acre in the first place. As far as she was concerned there was no better gift they could give their children than a natural playground that grew as they grew.

On the other side of the valley, beyond the Westburys' hayfield, the limestone terraces of Outrake Fell looked even more severe than usual with their fringes of icicles, and the Burnsalls' sheep, which were normally left to look after themselves on the high pastures during the winter, were down in the farm. The sound of their bleating rose with the slow smoke from the cottage chimney. It was the kind of scene that Juliette had imagined before they'd come to live here. A simplicity of movements and sounds.

Opening the field gate, Richard waded through the snow and headed for the tent that he'd set up before

Christmas. It was a good solid bit of kit, army surplus, and had stayed put during even the wildest weather.

October had been full of cold, brilliant sunshine, but November had brought gales and endless rain. Any ditches Richard dug had been quickly filled with oily green water and so one particularly sodden afternoon he'd driven down to Gordon Lambwell's to see if he had anything useful for sale.

Gordon, who'd been a friend of his parents, lived just outside Stythwaite on the road to Settle – a separation that suited both him and the villagers. His bungalow had the look of a Swiss cottage and behind it lay several acres of scrub and sheds where he kept his goods. Although the side of his van claimed that he dealt in antiques, the word was used in its loosest sense to mean anything that was old, and his outhouses were crammed with junk.

Up in the rafters of a tin-roofed shack he'd found a canvas tent bundled together with its poles and brought it down in a snowfall of dust. Richard had tried to pay him for it, of course, but Gordon had been reluctant to take his money for fear that it would seem as though he were endorsing the project and encouraging Richard to carry on. He was convinced that Richard's father's

decline had been caused by him grubbing about in the mud at Starve Acre.

‘Are you really sure you ought to be digging there?’ he said.

‘I can’t see that I’ve much choice,’ Richard replied. ‘It’s the only way I’ll know if the roots still exist.’

‘Best left undisturbed, if you ask me.’

‘If I lived by that maxim, Gordon, I’d be out of a job.’

‘All the same, I’d rather you stayed away from that field.’

‘Haunted, is it?’ said Richard.

Gordon smiled sardonically, changed the subject and took him into the house for a drink. ‘And how’s Juliette?’ he said. ‘Tell her that she must come and see me.’

She did.

And that had been the start of her obsession with Mrs Forde and the Beacons.

According to Gordon, the tent had been used in the war, though which war and for what purpose was uncertain. There were stains on the door flaps that looked remarkably like blood. Nevertheless, the material was of a sound, old-fashioned quality, as thick as

a sail, and when the rain was bearing across the field Richard was always warm and dry.

After the previous night's dump of snow, the tent had been half buried like many of the farmhouses in the dale. Only the ridge was showing and Richard had to kick the drift apart to get to the entrance. The animal tracks he'd seen from the study window made a detour here and inside the air was ripe with the sweet rankle of fox shit. The vixen that lived in the wood had been back, drawn either by the scent of the tea mug he'd forgotten to take back to the house, or the memory of kindness.

One afternoon a few weeks previously, he'd seen her coming up from the wood, a bright burn of amber in the snow.

When she spied Richard she stopped and stared, her mouth open, giving out white breaths. It was obvious that she was desperate for food like everything else, and he went back into the tent for the biscuits he'd brought. At the sound of him rustling the packet, the vixen shied away but soon came forward again, her timidity beaten by hunger. Shivering in her coat, she licked the broken digestives from his hand and allowed him to lay the back of his finger on her snout.

The fox had been the only thing of interest that day and every day that followed. The spade and the trowel had turned up precisely nothing.

Still, he'd known from the start that the whole venture would be something of a lottery. Centuries ago, the field had been part of a much larger common land and so it was difficult to know exactly where the Stythwaite Oak had once stood. As such, Richard's nominal plan had been to start in the centre of the plot and then move in increments as if he were going around a clock face.

If the tree had been as old and vast as the stories suggested then it must have had roots like Yggdrasil. But he had prepared himself for the fact that there might be little or nothing left to find at all. Most of the rainwater swept down the hillside and ended up in the beck and so the field wasn't boggy enough to preserve wood. Yet there was a chance that there might be fragments here and there.

He dug through the snow to find the pegs of the guy-ropes. With these unhitched, he lifted the fly sheet from the poles and laid it down on the drifts. The rectangular ditch of brown soil looked odd among so much white and caught the eyes of the rooks which descended

now, peering for grubs and worms. As Richard dismantled the frame, more of them settled on the wall, voicing their impatience, hoarsely demanding that he work somewhere else. But they could poke about here all day and not find a single thing to eat. The place was barren.

Taking up the poles, Richard carried them some ten yards further round the wheel he had envisaged and reassembled the uprights and the ridge in the place where he would dig next. With the snow shovelled away to the bare earth, he set up the rest of the tent, tautening the ropes, making sure that everything was weatherproof.

By the end of the process he was sweating under his coat and yet his toes and hands were numb. The shelter gave only an illusion of warmth, but nevertheless he was glad to get inside. He lit the gas lamp with a soft pup and let it burn for a few minutes, rubbing his palms together, wishing that he'd brought a flask of tea.

When he could feel his fingertips again, he took out his notebook and wrote the date at the top of a blank sheet. Then, having held the pages open with stones on the square of tarpaulin he used to keep his knees from getting soaked, he unbuckled the roll of tools.

With pegs and string and a trowel he marked out the six by four rectangle he would excavate, with margins wide enough for him to move around it without having to press his back against the canvas.

Having been insulated by the snow, the ground was claggy rather than frozen and peeled away from the edge of the trowel like curls of hard butter. Progress was, as always, slow and methodical and he dropped each bladeful into a sieve, dicing it up to see if there were anything inside, any indication that he might be close. But there was nothing.

Not that it mattered. Experience had taught him to be patient. Anyway, he was in no hurry to get finished. Away from the house he found a degree of peace. Ewan never bothered him out here in the field.

He worked for an hour and was digging deeper into one of the corners when he felt the trowel scrape across something hard. Using his fingers, he removed the mud more carefully and found the rim of a small pelvic bone.

As he cleared away one patch of soil after another, the rest of the skeleton was revealed. It was of a superlative delicacy and he willed himself not to break any of it, especially the skull which came out last.

It was a cat, he thought – their tortoiseshell, Lolly, who'd run away a year ago – or a rabbit or a fox cub. But then, on closer inspection, he knew it was a hare. Very likely it had been caught by a stray dog from the village or the vixen in the wood. Though when he brought the light closer to the carcass, it seemed too neat to be that of a creature killed by sharp teeth.

For the pelage, skin, muscle and fat to have rotted so cleanly and for the skeleton to be so perfectly preserved the animal had to have died naturally and lain in the field for some time. Richard wondered if he'd come across a collapsed rabbit warren. Not that the hare would have dug out the tunnel itself, but if it had been sick and old then it might well have commandeered some quiet hollow under the ground in which to expire. Either that, or the animal had been interred here deliberately. It was the kind of thing his father might have done in his last manic days at Starve Acre. Perhaps he'd found the hare on the lane and laid it to rest as he'd done with any dead thing he came across: spiders, birds, mice, he'd given them all a proper burial.

However they had come to be here, Richard couldn't leave the remains to be nosed apart by whatever came sniffing around, and so he took off his coat, laid it down

and began to pick the bones out of the hole. Each one came away cleanly from its neighbour and in his hands they felt stronger than they looked, robust enough to be carried home.

