

Comrades –

Either everyone in this strange hinterland that straddles the divide between two countries drives a silver 4x4 or I am being followed on a daily basis. Or I am a touch paranoid. How does the line go? ‘Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they aren’t after you...’

Certainly I arrived here in a state. Exhaustion, anxiety. Self doubt. The type of malady that had the wealthy of days gone by dispatched to Alpine spa towns to ‘take the waters’. I resorted to my usual crutches in such times of existential crisis: long walks, fire, confectionery. The very basics.

The cottage I have been afforded the use of for several weeks is in a very small village. The nearest shop is seven miles away; the pubs too. The closest train station is thirty miles. There is a bus stop but no buses. A phone-box but no phone.

Around me purple heathered moorland stretches in all directions so that on certain days when the light is just so it feels as if I am adrift on a distant lunar ocean. Fat pheasants so beautiful when grounded but vulgar and clumsy in flight explode from the thicket as I pass by. I track a hare for several consecutive days through the same pine wood and in my rural reverie its proportions appear distorted. Elongated. The hare appears as large as a horse. It is British mythology made real as it sits on its haunches, sniffing the air.

On a day like this it is hard to believe that the world is rife with war. All these despots need to come and observe the beautiful hare at play.

But then the next day I find it splayed on the road. Flattened. Its belly removed, entrails imprinted on the tarmac. Eyes pecked.

In time it becomes difficult not to see such omens and portents in the landscape. Small protests against my appearance here. Markers of my disturbance. It is a no-man’s land, the borders. An area of battles and bloodshed.

Perhaps that is why binoculars watch me from afar. The glint of a gamekeeper’s lens from the opposite hillside... later he pulls up in a car and just stares. When he speaks he warns me of hidden traps, dangerous snares. At night a mounted lamp

blinds me in white light as I walk down the lane in darkness. On another occasion I introduce myself to a villager. 'I know who you are', he says. 'I had an email about you last night'.

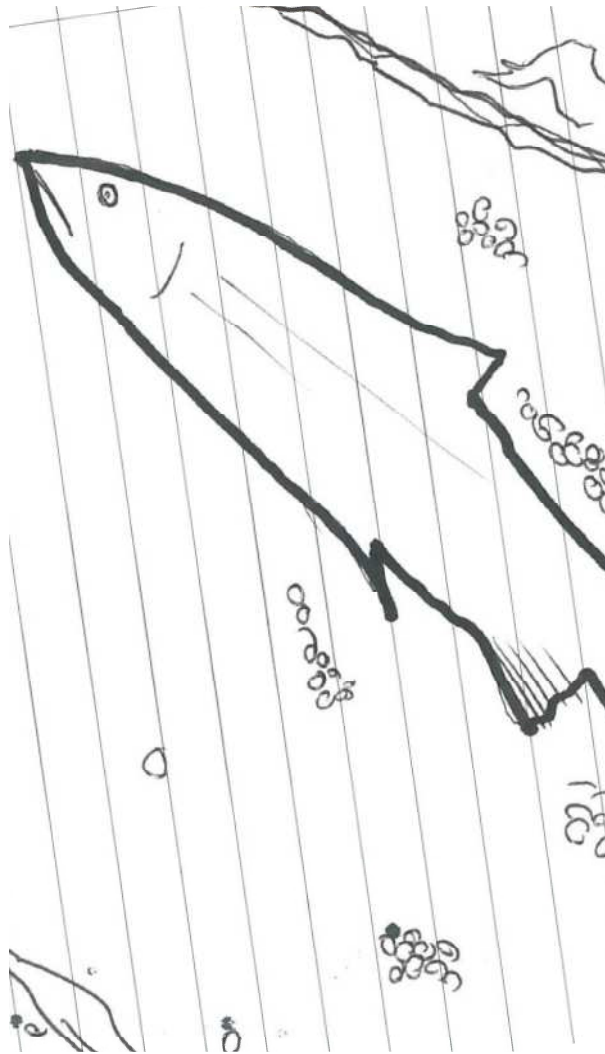
And the same silver 4x4. Always there. In the distance on silently turning empty village corners so that I only catch a fleeting glimpse of its tail-gate. Across the moor, watching as I stumble through tussocks of grass and methane bog.

Is, I wonder, the countryside conspiring to remind me I am but an interloper? A borderland intruder? Perhaps, perhaps...

They say the city has eyes but out here you cannot be anonymous. This is the paradox. You can climb a hill and watch the land roll away for thirty miles in all directions but still feel enclosed. Each twig I snap or foot-print I leave seems not to qualify my existence but protest my movement. It is as if the landscape – this ragged, raw, mesmerising, poetic landscape of life and death and sky – is only tolerating me. It knows I shall be leaving soon. And it looks forward to the day.

I, however, do not. I love it here.

Keep the powder dry –
Benjamin Myers



Benjamin Myers was born in Durham, UK. His novels include *Beastings* (2014), which won the Northern Writers' Award, *Pig Iron* (2012), winner of the inaugural Gordon Burn Prize, and *Richard* (2010), a *Sunday Times* book of the year. His poems and short stories have been widely published and other recent publications include a poetry collection *Heathcliff Adrift* and a novella, *Snorri & Frosti*.

Benjamin Myers's journalism has appeared in publications including *New Statesman*, *The Guardian*, *Mejo*, and *Caught By The River*. He currently lives in the Upper Calder Valley, West Yorkshire, where he spends a lot of time just wandering about and watching. The illustrations seen here and on the preceding page were enclosed with Benjamin's letter. We thoroughly approve of illustrations – and the Sad Salmon pictured above has become a particular favourite in the office – but would ask future correspondents to consider using unlined paper.