

Life, Death and Beating a Hasty Retreat

The last time I saw him he was a shape underneath a blanket, lying on a stretcher being carried out of a squat. I didn't know it was him: I worked that out the next day when I heard the news. He was found on his back, a needle stuck in his arm; he had choked on his own vomit. It was something I heard from a friend. There was nothing in the local paper. I had a go at composing an obituary:

Arthur Myers, 1990-2009

Arthur Myers, found dead in a Wolverhampton house last week, was an independently-minded, creative and at times intentionally provocative young man. A promising artist, his school career was cut short by his unwillingness to conform. The unsettled nature of his existence may have contributed to the substance abuse issues that lead to his untimely demise, two weeks short of his nineteenth birthday. He will be missed by his mother, and the small group of friends he cultivated during the final months of his life.

He was actually in the paper about a year before he died. It was the same day that they ran a feature on Della Harrington who'd just been awarded her Duke of Edinburgh's Gold. She was on page twenty; Arthur was on page five. He was in court charged with twenty-seven, mostly drug-related, offences. There were also charges arising from an incident of taking and driving away. This had lead to a police chase and a crash. He broke a leg, but was mobile enough to hobble off after he'd head-butted the policeman who tried to arrest him. When he appeared in court his leg was still in plaster. A medical report suggested that there was a risk of losing it. I don't know if he ever did. The shape I saw under the blanket wasn't one-legged so far as I could tell. Perhaps it was just one of those

things said in mitigation. That line I put in the obituary about him being a promising artist was used in court too. Arthur's solicitor said it during his summing up; he'd probably read it in a probation report. Truthfully, Arthur was quite good at art, but not brilliant. Before I knew him, he might have been quite good at a few things, but by the time we met, art was the only subject left that he showed any sort of interest in at all. The art teacher was the only one who wouldn't get on his case about his hairstyle, or complain that he wasn't wearing his tie, or tell him to sit down and shut up every thirty seconds. I saw his final report: he hadn't been in to school for months and his form teacher had put it to one side and forgotten about it. Art was the strongest: "The work Arthur has done shows promise, but sadly there is not enough of it to complete a GCSE portfolio. I haven't seen him for a while, but if he wants to enter the exam he is welcome to come in and discuss it with me." The Chemistry teacher wrote, "Arthur has not attended my class for some months. When he has attended in the past, I have had to expend considerable effort preventing him from becoming a threat to health and safety in the laboratory." Then there was PE – everyone gets a good report for PE, don't they? – "On the odd occasions Arthur attends these lessons, he is lazy, unfit and foul-mouthed. I don't know where he's been lately and I'm not sure I care." His attendance was always erratic, but nobody saw him at all for the last six months of school. He had turned up one morning, with a bright pink Mohican. The Head told him to go home and stay home until it had grown out. He did this, and came back in for a single day, his hair unspiked and dirty-blond, with a suede-like covering on either side. The next day the Mohican was back. As he walked through the door the Head was waiting for him, arms folded, blocking the way to the classrooms. They made eye-contact, and Arthur left. I'd first met him when I moved to the area with my family and been forced to start a new school. Everyone else had already been there for two-and-a-half years; they had settled into their cliques, and interlopers weren't welcome. As the new kid I stood out because I was

new; and I stood out because I didn't have anyone to stick up for me. One day Paul, someone who eventually became a friend, suggested that if I wanted to become popular I should punch Myers: "he's a jerk," he said; "no one likes him." I would have punched him. Gladly. He was one of the two lads who were doing their best to make my life a misery. "Hit him," Paul said, "you've got nothing to worry about: he's piss weak. He'll just fall over and cry." Paul was exaggerating: Myers wasn't as hard as he thought he was; if I'd have hit him, he would have hit me back; we'd have had a bit of a tussle, and one of the teachers would have separated and dragged us off to the head's study. Perhaps I'd have finished second, but I reckoned I could give him something to think about. The problem was Colin Simpson, the other lad trying to make my life a misery. I found out later that Simpson had only been at the school a few months longer than I had but he'd settled in by latching on to Myers. Myers had already built a reputation with teachers who thought he was surly, violent and unpredictable, and the two had gravitated to each other, like a wasp joining forces with an adder. Early on, perhaps during my first month at the school, they set off a fire extinguisher and tried to shove the hose down the trousers of another boy. The teacher who caught them was particularly annoyed with Simpson: "You've only been here a few months, and you've just taken up with this person here –" he gestured at Myers as he said that – "before we had the chance to find out what you're really like." I didn't need a chance to find out what Simpson was *really like*. I saw the two of them in close-up. I wanted a friend as close as they were to protect me from the rest of the school; they were friends to menace the rest of the school, menace the rest of the world even. There was no way that Myers had lead Simpson astray. Myers was a bully because he thought it was funny; the effects of his bullying were incidental, almost unintended. He hurt me when he poked me in the back with his compass, and when he nicked the pen that had been a present from my Gran; but he didn't hurt me when he kicked my bag under the desk, or when he

tried to punch me on the arm but just hit the padding on my coat. He had the same laugh each time; my reaction seemed to make no difference to him. Simpson enjoyed seeing people being hurt, and he knew how to make it happen. He didn't always do it himself, but he would provoke Myers to his more spiteful stunts. I wasn't their only victim: another boy had his glasses smashed by Arthur Myers. He had got them the day before. He'd had day off, and his mum had taken him to the opticians. He was really pleased because he'd chosen them himself: his first pair of grownup specs. Myers accidentally knocked them off while he was shoving him about. It was Simpson who noticed the look of terror on the lad's face when he thought they were broken, and encouraged Myers to step on them. It was also Simpson who stepped in when this lad, blind with more than just the loss of his glasses, attacked Myers. As he picked up the broken glasses he had thrown himself at Myers who was a couple of inches taller than him. Myers lifted an arm to shield himself and backed away. His escape was blocked by a wall. He would have found himself on the deck pretty quickly had he been on his own, but Simpson stepped forwards and tripped the other lad. As he fell he put out a hand to stop his face from hitting the ground. Simpson stepped on the hand, breaking two fingers, glanced round to make sure there were no witnesses, and then booted him in the kidneys. No witnesses, of course, means no significant witnesses. I didn't count. He didn't notice me; but if he had he'd have assumed I would be easy enough to intimidate into silence. I probably would have been, but we never got a chance to find out. The victim went off sick, and by the time he returned, Simpson had left the school: his family had moved house for the third time in five years I heard. The school, nervous about an OFSTED report, brushed over the incident. This wasn't the only time I saw Simpson and Myers without them knowing. They walked past my house one evening as I was looking out of my bedroom window, trying to find inspiration for my French homework. They might have been on their way out to cause mischief; they might have been on their way back

from causing it; they were certainly in a good mood about something. As I watched, Myers pushed Simpson into the road. Simpson laughed, and grabbed Myers in a headlock. They walked on in that position for a few yards before it became impractical. Simpson took a fraction of a second longer to release his friend than I would have expected. Myers laughed as Simpson released him, and moved closer, pressing their shoulders together. They disappeared out of view. After Simpson left, I relaxed. I started to make friends, and found I was settling in just as Arthur was coming loose. Even before the Head gave him the excuse he wanted, his attendance had grown more erratic. When he did show, he smelt of three-day-old sweat, cheap booze or weed. There were rumours that he had been thrown out of the house after his mum caught him smoking in his room. He was seen in town, hanging around with older lads and grown men. Someone claimed to have seen him slumped in an alley with his head in his hands. After his confrontation with the Head he dropped out of sight. The last time I saw him alive was Christmas a few months before his court case. I was in town one evening, and passed a large group of carol singers in the square outside the Civic Centre. Further along was a small group of punks and goths: Arthur Myers was one of them. His mates took it in turns to join in with the carol singers, laughing as they mouthed the words to "Oh Come All Ye Faithful." One of them nudged Arthur and gestured at him to join in too. He stood up and shouted. I couldn't hear him from where I stood. I'd be surprised if his mates could but I could make out what he shouted: "FUCK OFFFF". The muscles on his neck stood out like bow strings pulled taut, and his face looked as if he was trying to squeeze every last drop of sweat from it. Two event-stewards nearby must have heard him, because they gave chase. He slipped away into the crowd just as I had decided it was time to go. As I walked home, I saw the two stewards down an alleyway. They were taking it in turns to kick someone lying on the floor. I didn't want to

linger, but I could just make out the shape of someone curled up to protect himself from the rest of the world.