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Island Man in Paris

i.m Samuel Beckett

When I saw him last he was all dejection,
hands deep in the pockets of an old duffle –
he had a boatman's love of big hoods.
Living so far inland
he lacked a view of the sea,
though everything about him said islandman:

hair bleached white by the years at sea,
face chiselled by the salt in the wind.
Then those perfect blue eyes, set deep
to see through mist and spray. What hope
had eyes like these staring down narrow streets?
Everything crowding into them without perspective.

When I saw him last he was
standing amongst dust-bins.
"I'm old," he said, "I'm all used up.
I'm waiting to be collected."
"But Sam, there's no ships on the Rue St. Jacques."
"That's not strange," he said, "haven't you noticed,
there's no water. Only God's rain and our tears."

Tony Curtis

Tony Curtis's

When Sometimes all I Can Imagine are Hands

There is a winter within me,
a place so cold, so covered in snow,
I rarely go there. But sometimes,
when all I can imagine are hands,
when trees in the forest
look like they're made of wood,
then I know it's time
to take my photograph of Akhmatova
and sling it in a bag with socks and scarves.
My neighbours must think it strange
to see me strapping on my snowshoes,
to hear me roar at the huskies
as I untangle the harness.
But when all you can imagine are hands
it's best to give a little wave
and move out into the whiteness.

Staying at the Big House

for Mary & Bernard Loughlin

Colm,
Move your fucking jam-jar
from in front of the house –
The poets must be able to see
the lake at all times.
Bernard

Poets, painters, playwrights haunt this house,
it is an eerie place to linger after dark.
My room looks out over a shadowy lake;
a cauldron of dreams for the banshee,
a dark well for the women of the wood.
At dusk I shutter my window against their spells,
turn my chair toward the fire and wait
for spirits to emerge from the walls,
to haunt the rooms with wails like the wind.
Last night I met the ghost of a girl upon the stairs.
She had pale blue eyes and pale blue hair.
As she swept through me, my bones were dipped
in ice – as if she had stolen a kiss from my soul,
and my soul had died for a moment to steal it back.

Unveiling

I

This could be Tuscany
but for the rain, the mist
and the hundreds of stone walls;
yesterday as I clambered over one
the whole lot came tumbling down on me.

You are gone only three days
and already I am bruised inside and out.

I miss your hands and their unveiling.

II

They have begun a dig on Mooghaun Hill.
Three feet down the earth has revealed
the remains of an ancient hut,
its door, like ours,
facing away from the wind.

Hard to imagine that three feet
of leaves and dust have fallen
since someone last stood
in that doorway
waiting, as I do now, for the mountains
to define the shape and route of a woman.

Northern Haiku

On an Antrim bog
a wall divides the wet land,
planted in the past.

Shot twice in the head.
Once in each astonished eye.
History is blind

Over the dark Foyle
the bark of Kalashnikovs,
an old Derry air.

Punishment shooting.
Pleads remorse and forgiveness.
Jeans gone at the knees.

Protestant prayers.
Popish prayers. Funerals.
We go the same way.

A man ploughing,
in one field he furrows from
Ireland to England.

A blackbird's sweet song
lost in the wildness of hills –
prayer for the dead.

From a Famine Journal

I

A list of exports leaving Cork harbour
On the 14th November 1848

147 bales of bacon
120 casks of pork
135 barrels of pork
149 casks of miscellaneous provisions
1,996 casks of oats
950 barrels of oats
300 bags of flour
300 head of cattle
239 sheep
5 casks of ham
9, 398 firkins of butter
542 boxes of eggs

We watched it sail into a hungry wind.

II FIRST IMPRESSION

1845

In her parlour, by a window that frames
the picture of a grey sky, Mrs. Elizabeth Wyatt
is polishing off an entry in her journal:
I've never seen Dublin so prosperous,
nor its fashions so exquisite.
Its straw bonnets are the best in Europe.
There's surely less misery than ever before.
And Mrs. Weaver's daughters, is there
anything so beautiful as delicate white hands?
We ate raised pies and ham, and apple tarts
with cream. Drank China tea all evening
from Mrs. White's white China cups.
This potato famine is greatly exaggerated.
In Dublin the Polka is all the rage.

III PASSING THROUGH

1846

Today I travelled the whole estate
and saw little or no distress, just
two dead and a few cases of struggling.
The Irish are idle, impudent louts.
Dependent on those whom they so badly
abuse. No name seems too harsh for them.
So we have begun feeding our workmen,
thirty-two at present; half one day,
half the next. Charles killed a cow.
And the servants make a large pot of soup
which we serve each day at one.
Yesterday, I thought it such a pretty sight
to see everyone eating in the kitchen.

IV WASTED MISERY

1847

Beyond the estate is a waste of misery.
There aren't the living to bury the dead.
I have watched them die in the ditches.
Seen them kneel down to curse their God.
No man, no woman, no priest, not even I
have the loaves and fishes to feed them.
And worse, the rags they wear barely
cover their decency. Even yesterday
when I called to see young Peggy Dodson,
whose husband and children have died,
she herself was almost naked and made no move
to cover her shame. I sleep badly these nights;
often, after undressing, I sit by the fire
reading or knitting petticoats for the wretched.

V TERRIBLE DEAD

1847

Today I walked the back road home over the hill,
past farms that hadn't a hoof on their land.
Strange to say I saw no children in the lanes.
Some have been taken to relations in Dublin.
Four sheep and five cattle have been taken
from our land in the past month.
Having seen how some of the people die,
I hardly blame the wretches who steal.
But Charles is as mad as the Irish
and has employed three men from Dublin
to walk the fields at night with sticks and dogs.
I'm only surprised that such a superstitious race
aren't afraid to venture into darkness.
Even I wouldn't be found in the fields at night,
not with the ghosts of the terrible dead lurking.

VI WRETCHED CARGO

1848

This morning they sent thirty or forty
more convicts to the penal colonies.
Amongst them I saw, ironed and handcuffed,
the two Maguires whose mother I know well.
She has worked in the kitchen and was a
wet nurse when each of my children was born.
So I am ashamed to say she wasn't allowed
say goodbye to her sons, or even to touch
their hands, their faces, one last time.
The families of this wretched cargo
lined the road, their wives wailing.
And yet, miserable as these men looked,
I felt they were still better off
than the starved wretches waiting to hang.

VII RUINED CHRISTMAS

1848

My husband says, "If this is the line
The Government and the Lords are taking
it would be better if they hanged them all
as most are so weak they'll not make it so far."
The vicar says, "The Maguire boys were drinking,
shouting for all who wanted to hear that
the new Commission was no better than if
the devil himself were trying to starve us."
Surely they should be forgiven such ignorance,
flayed even, or put to work on the roads,
not sent from the land like criminals.
I must send Mrs. Maguire the side of a lamb.
All this misery has again ruined Christmas
for everyone. I pray for a brighter new year.

VIII BIG HOUSES

1849

Many of the big houses and their estates
have come to the end of their lives.
The Barclays and the Hamiltons have fled.
Even Lady Dodd who had so much is leaving.
Bankruptcy, it seems, is overtaking us all.
Once the gates of an estate are closed
the house is gutted of its life. Everything
of value is stolen, and sold for passage to America.
They're saying they have found gold in California.
That a man can earn forty pounds a day.
Here the wages, for those who can find work,
are three pence a day. But the good news is
we had new potatoes at dinner, floury and dry.

IX VICTORIA VISITS

1849

Though there is cholera in Dublin I steeled myself
and went to see the young Queen promenade.
For many the day was spoilt by torrential rain,
but I was more distressed to see her grown so fat.
Her dress was far too plain, her skin almost dark.
Though the papers have her down as beautiful.
I suspect some poor man is bound to lose his job
for the terrible misprint in the second column:
"The Queen pissed over the bridge". I am ashamed
to say I held my breasts and rudely laughed.
On the way home we passed a family of five
dead in a ditch. It seems the cholera is spreading
towards the mountains. But worse news was awaiting
our arrival, the blight has appeared on our potatoes.

1850

We docked last week in Sydney after eight months
at sea and left a ship I had grown to abhor.
I doubt I will ever get over the shame of undressing
and washing in front of other women. But worse,
what youth I had I left in Ireland ravaged by
famine, cholera and five wretched years of misery.
Sadly, we buried Lady Hutton and Mr. Vicars at sea.
Though I doubt they would have liked it here.
There is a nearness in the sun's heat.
I was saddened to hear that convicts and soldiers
and farmers are still clearing the land of natives.
After a life of such worry, it's a great relief to be opening
a hotel in the city for respectable ladies and gents
or as Charles says, "The new Australians like ourselves".

from Three Songs of Home (1998)

Still Life with Books

Most mornings I wake early
as if I have somewhere to go,
something to do. I potter
for an hour through books,
papers, photographs.

Then I sit by the window
for the rest of the day.

And if there is rain,
I fish for tears.
And if there is mist,
I sift for ghosts.
And if there is snow,
I chisel for stars.

In between
I pace the room
or watch the gate
for the comfort
of the postman. How
did I end up like this?

A watcher of skies
and fields that run to clouds;
a keeper of stillness,
a moonface at the window,
a love gone to darkness,
a still life with books.

Nude

She has been with me all winter.
I cannot say I hate her
for when I was young
I loved everything about her.
There were nights
I could have died for her.
Now there's an awful
pattern to our lives.

She arrives late September
carrying sacks of old books,
and pinned to her dress
or tied in her hair,
or buried in the folds
of her skin,
are those few new poems
I have waited all summer to hear.

But each year her price
goes a little higher
and I grow weary.
Often she undresses
to the bone:
peeling her skin,
folding the wrinkled
hide over the bed
where she sups and stares.

Often she strips me too,
planting the tips
of her fingers
like roots in my eyes,

or pushing her tongue
deep into my mouth.
Bare. Naked. Nude.
Unless you've ever
served her,
felt her cunning
on your lips,
you'll never know
the meaning of the word.

And yet,
one of these mornings
I'll find her
standing in the kitchen
dressed for the road,
coat, hat, scarf,
bags tied with string,
and I'll be on my knees
begging her to stay.

The Long Rest

Late autumn. They are taking the dead
from the church and bringing them
up to the field at the back of the town
where they will leave them forever.

It has put me in mind of the day
my grandfather retired.
Kathleen and Carmel, the daughters
who lived with him at home,

had cooked rashers and sausages,
baked sweet apple tart, had the
kettle on the stove, ready to scald
the leaves when they heard the gate.

Half-past-six, the same as every other day,
the latch was lifted, the bicycle stored
and my grandfather came in from work
to rest by the fireside forever.

He took from his waistcoat the silver
pocket watch he had been given,
told the girls he'd done well,
then handed them each a brown envelope.

Vouchers for Clery's?
Tickets to the Olympia?
No, my grandfather
was a practical man.

Currach

This is my boat.
I made it
with my own hands.
I took salt
from a bitter wind,
hair from
a horse's mane,
thread from
a woman's blouse.

Three stories
my father told me.
The sideways look
my mother has
when she is
curious and alone.
Her silent prayers.
A few rusty nails
from the kitchen door.

Three views of the island:
one in mist, one in rain,
one rocking in a drunken sea.
No flowers.
My people
had no love of leaves,
they saw boats in trees;
now the boats are gone
And the hills are bare.

At night, I sowed
curses into the oars,

rubbed fish oil
into the wood,
for I knew the journey
that lay ahead.
My people's story
was written on water.
Most of it is washed away.

My grandfather
knew the tale
but he'd not tell it.
His ghost sits
in the stern
saying:

The future
is a steady course,
row strongly.

Six Twenty-five a.m.

I notice the birds go to church
more often than the people now;
they roost on the roof and sing.
I wonder what God makes of
their feathers and their twittering?
Of course the birds are
more primitive than us,
they were singing
before the crosses came
and they will sing
when the crosses are gone.

I have seen them
in the ruins of monasteries
come down from the trees
to sing among the stones.
And in graveyards, they have
no fear of shadow or ghost,
for they make their nests
in the yew trees beside the graves
and sing, and sing, and sing
as if the poor souls lying there
should be happy.

The Well in the Rain

i.m. Kevin Curtis 1921-2004

I

AND WHEN THE HEART

One fine morning when my life is over
I'll fly away, O Lordy, I'll fly away...

and when the heart gives out
when the breath
and the beating are gone

when the bones heave up
on their final shore
when the voice is still for evermore

when the room is so quiet
you can hear death
beginning its old sad song –

the eternal lament of the heart's last beat.

~

That's the thing about the weather –
every day in Ireland
is a good day for a funeral
unless you're burying your own father
then it's a horse of a day.

~

Sometimes I lie in bed at night
wondering about the dead.
Asleep, but wondering:

Do you think they're gone to a land of song,
do you think they're gone and they belong?

Do you think they're gone to the forest deep,
do you think they're gone and their fears all sleep?

Do you think they're gone where the clouds all go,
do you think they're gone with an easy flow?

Do you think they're gone where the prayers are true,
do you think they pray for me and you?

Do you think they're gone where the winds all blow,
do you think they walk through a land of snow?

Do you think they're gone to the river's end,
do you think they're gone and they've found a friend?

Do you think they're gone where the stars go out,
do you think they're gone or are they still about?

All his life my father
made and mended things:
bicycles to begin with,
then motor bikes,
tabernacles for churches,

small chalices
that held the body
and blood of Christ.

Between buying
his first Ford Prefect
and his first Ford Anglia,
he made my first wardrobe.
Sad to say,
I blew it up
one summer making
blackberry wine.

He was always
scraping and papering.
He wore a brown coat
covered in paint and glue.
Some days he would
shimmy from his shed
covered in dust
looking like Michelangelo.

He would have been
making something
for my mother,
a new rail for the stairs,
a green box to hold
the Christmas tree.
Now her forest is felled,
the wood is silent,

the season turns
from autumn to winter.
I'll remember him there
in the corner, making.
As he grew old
his hands were always cold.
Still, he like a job done right;
the story well told.

Even as he lay dying
he was measuring the clouds
above bed twenty-three
in St. Patrick's Ward.
Until, finally, with his
last few breaths,
he lifted his arms and
began painting heaven's door,

making it ready for us
who'll follow after.

II

HYMN TO LIFE

The humpity sand dunes
on the edge of the beach
is where I go for quiet.

Not that there is
much of that to be found,
not with the waves sighing.

Not that I mind.
Over the years I've
gotten used to the tears.

The gulls are the worst,
crying all hours of the day.
At night it's the sea that moans.

I hate to say it, but sometimes
I join in; long, deep sighs
coming over the dunes,

with the waves, the wind and the gulls
we're not exactly the Hallelujah Chorus,
more the *What-the-fuck-will-we-do-now Lament.*