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“Quiddity | Leaving Home”

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in Creative Writing at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Jonathan U. Barton

MFA in Creative Writing, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2019

BA in English, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2012

Director (Poetry): David Wojahn, Professor, English

Director (Creative Nonfiction): Sonja Livingston, Assistant Professor, English

Virginia Commonwealth University

Richmond, Virginia

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Jonathan U. Barton 2019  
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## Acknowledgment

I want to thank my wife, Mollie, for her encouragement and love. This would never have happened without her. I want to thank my children, Ben and Cate, for their endless inspiration. And I want to remember my late mother-in-law, Kay, who was always my biggest fan.

## Abstract

### QUIDDITY | LEAVING HOME

By Jonathan U. Barton, MFA in Creative Writing

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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The poetry collection in four sections features pieces concerned with memory, particularly of the author's childhood in Ireland. Difficult family relationships as well as early romantic failures are prominent obsessions. Landscapes and careful portraits of characters recur. Travel to Eastern Europe and within the author's adopted United States give the opportunity to meditate on larger issues and spans of time. Domestic pleasures and the struggle to be a good parent and husband provide the ultimate trajectory of the work.

The nonfiction memoir consists of eight essays which tackle among other topics a failed first marriage, a return visit to the author's high school in Dublin, an analysis of how the dead come back to haunt us in the everyday, and a mirroring of colonial exploration in contemporary lives. The common thread is the many ways "home" can be understood and run away from.

## Table of Contents

Quiddity.....	8
I. Dress Up.....	9
Conker Season.....	10
Keepsake.....	11
Sallynoggin.....	12
Among Women.....	13
Grandfather’s Shop.....	14
Child’s Play.....	15
Brittas Bay.....	16
Back Garden.....	17
Birds of America.....	18
Summer Camp.....	19
St. Paul’s.....	21
Uncle Paul.....	22
Her Flat.....	24
Bruxelles Hotel Bar.....	25
Predator.....	26
Dress Up.....	27
II. First Night.....	28
Riding Westward.....	29
Kreuzberg.....	31
Rathmines.....	32
Museum of Her Last Letter.....	33
At Lublin.....	34
Pigeon Lady.....	35
Muse.....	36
Pearse’s Cottage.....	37
First Night.....	39
History.....	40

III. Fishing the Rappahannock .....	41
Quiddity.....	42
Fall Again.....	43
yard work, late spring .....	44
North Fork.....	45
Fishing the Rappahannock .....	46
Meeting My Father after 36 Years .....	47
Thanksgiving.....	48
Procedure.....	49
On My Brother .....	50
Elegy for Laura .....	51
Retreat Hospital .....	52
Alley Light.....	53
Visitation .....	54
Under the Shade of Live Oaks.....	55
At the Hoh Rain Forest.....	56
IV. The Legion of Honor .....	57
Walking on Jane Austen.....	58
The Legion of Honor.....	59
Two Puddle Farm .....	60
Rampart .....	62
Husbandry .....	63
S. Cherry St.....	64
Open House at the University Art School .....	65
Miró at Varengeville.....	66
Firebird.....	67
Leaving Home.....	69
The Dog Left Behind.....	70
My Mother .....	72
Weighing Scale .....	78
The Breadth of Sackville Street .....	83
89 Lower Leeson Street .....	93

The Scar..... 104  
Discovery Path Loop Trail..... 119  
Burn Pile..... 127



# Quiddity

Poems

Jonathan U. Barton

## I. Dress Up

## Conker Season

(For John Foyle)

Morning star, flail, spiked ball, ball and chain, naval mine,  
- my favorite: burr - grey wolf, the green carapace bombs fall

pockmarking car bonnets along Leeson Street, Sussex Road,  
hiding in drifts of big eared leaves. We search, spooling home

from school past grey terraces, high Georgian windows,  
the prized ones already cracked open, the mahogany fruit pulled

easily from the flesh. Borrowing my grandfather's gimlet  
tool with polished wooden handle to drill holes, pull twine

through, the season is underway - it never goes well. Each  
démarche in the playground ending with a smashed conker

the string dangling as the classmate laughs and walks off.  
Only the chestnuts I hoard in my sock drawer survive, taken

out to polish, turning and turning in the hand like the beads  
of a giant rosary, praying our way through childhood.

## Keepsake

Mist bands in the kitchen the kettle makes.  
He pushes open the door of the scullery.  
No light back there. Whenever I wished

to feel fear I hid in the brushes and aprons  
hanging by their rusted nails, shoved the door shut  
from the inside. Felt the darkness. Hide

and seek when the cousins came: stomping feet,  
yelling through walls. But I was safe  
with those forgotten instruments.

He kneels slowly, I know that slowly now.  
Knocking against pails and great heads of mops  
he pries a wooden partition from the wall

where the ceiling slopes – same motion  
of awe the priest makes folding back the brazen  
tabernacle doors. My torch beam floods

the crawl space, dust soft and white  
on the rubble of bricks. I never thought of this  
running up and down the staircase overhead –

the hollowness under all things. He hauls  
the gun metal box squealing over linoleum  
back into the kitchen light, lifts the kettle

from the hob, swipes at the low clouds.  
The important papers: the deed of the house,  
insurance, birth certificates, savings bonds,

and the telegram he got when he was 21 to say  
Martha his sister had died from a chill she caught  
sitting on the beach, the shingle beach

the gray stones unnumberable.

## Sallynoggin

It must have been a birthday party but I  
cannot remember their name. A mother  
collected me. The window was rolled down  
to the autumn passing: horse chestnuts, girls  
with long legs I would not dare to look at  
if only walking. She yelled at me to pull  
my arm back inside. I was never invited  
again. By the time we sang over the cake  
it was dark. No one could see me as I slipped  
outside to play with the toys scattered  
on the lawn. Six perfect little plastic milk  
bottles, just like the milkman used to deliver  
cold before the dawn. As if the world could be  
written down and corrected. And the water  
still swayed on the surface of the pool.

## Among Women

We dipped fingers in the cold font passing in from the blare  
on Whitefriar Street, the women's heads wrapped tight, scarves

knotted under the chin the way Grace Kelly used to wind them.  
I said the name as *white fires* entering the cavern of the nave,

eyes soothed by the haze rising from the candles at the Saints'  
feet. Gran dragged me there on Saturdays, her own map of *The Way*

overlaid on paths and Dublin bus routes. The Carmelite shrine  
a favorite: her softened hands, which had begun to clench even

in sleep (even when taking me by the chin to clean the ceruman  
from my ears) tugged at the tap to fill the metal beaker, the drips

afterwards spreading a wasteful echo through the marble hall.  
I sipped the holy water imported from Lourdes. We filled some

empty bottles for home. She swore by it - never heard of *Evian*  
or *Vichy*. A plaster Bernadette kneeled on the floor beaming

at the fake rock face. Why shouldn't a god choose an ignorant  
girl? Who fell behind her friends in the woods

when they crossed the stream. Who sat down to take off her  
rough stockings when light flashed overhead. Who years later

would spend hours stitching embroidery on altar cloths  
and vestments for the priest who elevates the body and blood.

## Grandfather's Shop

Period details: overcoat  
with wide lapels, the way he shrugged

it up onto his stooped shoulders going out,  
his gamp, galoshes, the rain slant, whipped,

he walked into *town*, that weighted word,  
the center of a life, past Stephen's Green,

down Dawson Street, the charred black  
of Trinity, to the shop, *Findlater's*,

I was too young to visit yet. I see him switching  
to a white coat, maybe an apron – but still

his grey trilby cocked on his thinning hair! –  
gripping the wooden handle, wielding the wire

to slice a wedge of waxed Cheddar and wrap  
it in rattling paper for Mrs. O'Toole.

## Child's Play

Pulling a strand of green yarn the teacher  
frowning unraveled line after line of the black-  
haired child's knitting sample, then stapled

the remnant (the size of the Queen of Hearts)  
into a copybook. He would long remember  
her firmness, *Miss Rock*, though her cheeks

had the softness of age. He could see that.  
Returning to the little square desk with rounded  
corners low to the checkered floor he felt the heat

erupt his ears - a bonfire on a hill. Louise however  
did not mind, still sat knee to knee at lunchtime,  
ate her cheese sandwich like a magic act.

In the yard we would play the staring game:  
you gaze into the iris, that polar map of the soul's  
regions, then one smacks the other on the arm

and the screaming chase is on. Where did she get to?  
Today I registered my boy for kindergarten. I love  
how there never seems to be uncertainty for him.

By his age, Louise's dad, and mine, were gone.  
Walking home we would play the door game:  
you stand to attention, a child soldier, and the other

one raps the vertebrae between the shoulder  
blades we always thought of as hidden wings  
and you turn the body stiffly like a weathervane

and the last one walks through to another world.



## Brittas Bay

Leaning against my dad's belly,  
his shirt open, the sea breeze  
whipping our black hair  
and the dune grasses.  
I remember wrapping  
the yellow green strands  
around and around  
my hand trying to pull  
them from the earth.

## Back Garden

6 Florence Terrace was a corner house. From a corner, you know, you can look into two distances which cannot turn around and look back at each other. Standing at a corner it is like you are the one with a secret, with two secrets in fact. The blue front door faced the quiet cul de sac. The side of the house, with its long blank brick gable and rear extension with windows facing the busier through street.

There was a waist high stone wall round the side garden. To shield this garden and my childhood my grandfather built a solid wooden fence, six feet high, wrapping around inside the stone wall. When I read what I have written I could as well be reading about the builder of a medieval fort, with motte and bailey, with ditches and palisades. Nothing was safe in the distant past.

Crouching down to rest my cleft chin on my bare knees I watched with brown eyes and shivers the elephant skinned backpacker drag his spiral home along the stone path trailing slime. I learned something about time from this repulsive thing. Cramps would cause me to spring up after minutes focused on the slow crawl and have to stamp out the pins and needles in my legs. I would fright myself reaching a finger out to touch one of the tentacles

causing it to shrink into itself, or more daringly I would force myself to pick one up by the shell and help it quickly reach its destination – the stand of fronds at the path's end. An empty shell was a terror. It curled away emptily inside itself, but there might be something round the corner, you didn't know. I would never keep an empty snail shell in my room.

Every few years he would rebuild the fence. One of his sons, like my uncle Paul, would come to help, dig out the concrete footing the posts were set in and lift out a section and lay it down. It was like a curtain pushed back and the world revealed. The top halves of people walking by – their heads turned slowly to gaze in. The secret garden I have tried to look into every time I return.

A fence makes two solitudes. How lovingly he replaced rotted planks, hammering the pickets to the rails. Then mixed fresh concrete in the side yard, forming a little volcanic cone with the sand and dusty cement and pouring in the water and mixing with his trowel and pouring in more water and mixing with that pointed tool. An imprint was left on the paving for years after. That was the summer.

## Birds of America

(For A.P.)

In Mr. Hackett's art class in high school  
I yearned to draw one elegant bird,

which would be in hue and captivity  
the same as the red wing we watched

from the windowpane, wiping the fog  
of our breath from the cold glass,

lift off from a brown branch  
of sycamore into winter sky.

Afternoons I lifted and turned the leaves  
of his Audubon in the empty classroom.

Footballs ricocheted in the yard. I loved  
the white space round the still drawings

and the watercolor flowers Mason painted  
when he shot the birds for his master.

## Summer Camp

I measured it. In the atlas it was a hundred and sixty-six miles west of my bed, a coastline of hairpins the sharpened pencil will remember, turning back and back on a sheet of translucent

paper placed over shy counties pink and green, a communion veil. I hear my laced shoes clatter down the steps of the bus, (those buses with their rounded temples, and softness) the yelling of boys,

and then the corncrake, and then the cows at their evening trough, or so I arrange it. The woman of the house pulling her hair tight in a grey bun before the hall stand, cinched a scarf under the chin,

hopefully mounted her bicycle, and off to Mass. What remains is that photograph, as she balances before me, a smile over the knot of her scarf (the pattern printed on that square of silk,

yellow and arabesque, not found thereabouts) and out of focus a wall of peat, behind the skirts of her raincoat. In the mornings we had class across the bog. There was no translation of my name.

I was not. Neither will I be. We smuggled English in at recess, feeling a little shame, but later sitting in someone's kitchen when a man would stand up in the whitewashed corner, closing

his eyes and intoning old songs, the *sean-nós*, phrases building and extending the ramparts of a lost stronghold, then we knew power. In the long twilight we took baths and I wrapped

a towel round my boyish waist while the others jeered and shoved and dried each other's hair with a jagged seesaw motion, two on either side of a tousled head and bare shoulders,

intimate frantic space. And then the teacher in the schoolyard, his Hawaiian shirt open to a hairy chest, his arms crossed, he stares into the camera's eye. I wanted him to be my father.

The sun a phalange of rays around him. He was probably twenty-five or thirty, but to my eleven years his was the voice I hearkened to, dark hair on his chest and arms like my

absent father's, like my own now. In different houses the girls at their mysteries. Saturday night a disco in the town hall drew short dark figures by twos and threes along the lanes,

whisperings and shouts, while light stayed in the fields. Helen in an A-line dress at the edge of the parking lot. She I could converse with, yet on a dare, I pecked at her cheek as she turned away, and summer was done.

## St. Paul's

A boy stumbles on the cricket  
field, crying with a bloodied hand,

and stops to watch the dawn light  
Kangchenjunga, the taste of sugar

on his tongue, each bright slope  
he will never climb. Father

gone back to Burma to claim  
his pre-war property, *good riddance*,

shall not meet again. *I punched  
the bastard and his thick skull broke*

*the window, bloody smashed it!*  
See the glass and the mountain

in the memoir. The classmate lifted  
carefully from the fractured frame.

My father's pride at his expulsion:  
how before the war only European

boys could on those fields. I hand  
him a cup of Darjeeling under

the magnolia tree, his third wife's  
small hand resting on his stomach.

## Uncle Paul

Green and yellow come from the earth, you said, like daffodils,  
or dandelions. Bite the cable with the scissors till you cut the skin,

but do not sever the copper bundle – strip the sheath and fold  
the fascies back upon themselves. You watched me with dark pupils do it.

I threaded the fold into the eyelet and tightened the tiny screws.  
Then the neutral, then the live – that one you must not touch

if you would live – and plug it in and behold: the lesson  
illuminated now – so many evenings like that, following school,

clattering down the three steps into the same steaming kitchen  
where you were raised, the same bare armed woman at the stove

making tea, who raised us both, I was so happy you'd stopped by.  
Everything about you bristled: your dry shaven jaw, the combed

back hair, your anger with the coalition government talking  
to the British, they were always wrong. I thought I was

supposed to debate things with you, as a son would, a symposium  
in which the kicks and feints were not expected to be really real.

There are fixed moments in time, like metal spikes driven into  
earth to make a boundary, when loyalty ends, and ours

was the day of my grandmother's - your mother's – funeral  
yelling at each other for an hour in Carmel's kitchen –

(at the edge of her sink the little pile of tea bags she would save  
and use again, a gentle loving woman, yet I never call her).

And other moments when love might begin: you and your baby  
sister when she came home from the hospital, the only one born

in a hospital, that new-fangled habit. Confederates  
growing up, always in the thick of it together – you taught her

how to drive. Barbara laughed about that as we drive through  
Wales, in her mustard Mini 1000, on the way to her London flat.

I cannot blame everything on the souring between you and mum.  
I had my own part to play. My own peculiar personality.

That time playing rough with my cousin I got him on his back  
and dangled a broken brick above his knee – I hear his plea

but my own thought's dark – I threw the brick, became wandering  
Cain. I see his young boy's blood, see the jealousy

I felt against children who had a father. I threw the brick  
deliberate. There. That's what's been bothering me all along.

I felt my punishment because I did not own the crime. When  
my own children in this softer southern place do something,

especially my son, who has my anger, I am hard on them,  
in case someone should see, and understand, the recollection I carry.



## Her Flat

She arrived in the city  
at twenty-one with a girl

friend and a suitcase  
decorated on the inside

with pasted wallpaper. You  
could go to a man's place

after dancing, but you had  
to keep five pounds hidden

to get a taxi home. Her  
freckled skin must have shone

like milk against my father,  
but I've only seen black

and white snaps. In his papers  
though there was a polaroid

of a visit to her flat. He sits  
cross-legged, smoking, slim,

reading a book of poetry,  
not looking at the camera.

On the back she has written  
about her new curtains.

## Bruxelles Hotel Bar

Each self-portrait in the long gold mirror  
shows a man laughing or smoking in the crowded

bar, shirt collars burst open. Maybe a rock star  
in the men's taking a slash. Twenty years

since he first took a boat to that friendly town.  
A bar maid stops to chat, her sleeves

rolled up, her tray balanced on one hand,  
she moves the other (everything about her

peeled back like a mural uncovered  
on a church wall) in a slow motion from her hip

to his breastbone to steady her in the crush  
of men and at that instant he had his first heart

attack. The crowd roared in his ears, back crucified  
against the brass pole along the bar, cold sweat

on his forehead. He looked up out the window  
at the gray sky of the city and pressed his crotch

against the girl, laughing.

## Predator

In Jefferson County a geologist in grad school crouches  
on a slope before me. The children in the tour group

spread chaotic on the path around. Yodeling. Jostling.  
I'm carrying two backpacks, three coats.

Her folded knees and pressed khakis are ineluctable.  
She raises her guide voice as she jokes about her boyfriend's

accent. If she were a cat burglar on a roof at night I'd let her go  
– Brigitte Auber, say, in *To Catch a Thief* – but now

waving her hand all the children and the parents quiet,  
points to a concrete patch in the rock face below her white

high tops, where some frat boys had cut out the fossilized  
footprints of an *Eolambia caroljonesa* running through mud,

for a dare. We turn to stare, bewildered that the motion  
of pursuits remain. Yet smile for we know well the prey.

## Dress Up

Did I ride my bike or just levitate  
the Dublin streets. The way a movie camera  
glides on its rails in old cinema?

Round the square of the black thick-painted railings  
of Stephen's Green, one mile exact the perimeter,  
or serpentine quickly past rose beds, swans, bronze

patriots within. Emerge under Fusiliers' Arch  
where the fighting is still desperate at Hart's Hill,  
Ladysmith, and rough at Laing's Nek.

Second assistant side lighting grip in my senior year.  
Real money, pound notes and heavy coins  
in an envelope with a frosted windowpane

because I'd done a good job with the school play  
the "professional" they'd brought in said.  
The teacher who wrote the play had a brother

in TV. We laughed at him. Every building  
on the theater's narrow street would be torn down  
and raised up again in time. Rice's pub, remember –

at the corner. Saturday mornings playing chasing  
in the split level landings above the bar. The screams.  
Damian would leap out of an airing cupboard, a sheet

tied round his neck like Dracula. I avoided his  
touch. Something had come out wrong  
when the chrysalis of puberty cracked I thought.

Backstage I hefted heavy lamps in between  
the flats when the main cast went on, stood sentry  
to hold the oversized heads from drooping.

Actors exiting brushed close, the air burning,  
pulled off corsets and discarded  
sword belts, snorting at their performance.

## **II. First Night**

## Riding Westward

The ice sheet of late January cracking, white  
mountains freed and floating under the parapet steadily,

a swaying like the deck of a ship facing an armada,  
I return to the Poniatowski Bridge.

How daring the first engineer who thought to drive  
a pylon stake into the shoulder of a rushing river.

Winter ending, I could no longer live in a wooden  
house, heated by burning wood in the mountains, listening

at night to the creaks of love in the room beyond  
the stove. The train from the south had brought me.

Everyone had a destination. Their coats were convincing,  
even their leather gloves. The girls with yellow cheeks held

their books open in prayer – even their imaginary worlds  
seemed certain, though they would not believe in me.

I stumbled the clacking corridor, faces behind glass,  
white fields behind glass – Kapuściński said snow

was a balm in 1945, blanketing the flesh and char  
of the earth. The traveler leaves behind more than he

takes: my green tent folded up in a corner of the cabin,  
the canes bending with elasticity to bear the dome.

Perhaps the baby who used to drowse on the kitchen  
table in our writing evenings found it one summer,

slept in the pasture listening to llamas and goats.  
I would return. In winter you go outside for water,

for firewood, to use the long drop, to escape the triangle:  
one woman, two men. The world is white, there is nothing

beyond the valley. You can trek into the woods and yell  
as loud as you lust and the woodpecker still knocks

when you go silent. Winching a bucket from the well  
and then another, you walk back slowly, spilling,

pulled always towards the earth.

## Kreuzberg

If he had been a painter it would have been one of his best canvases. A long-boned girl with her straw hair chopped short the way German girls liked, lying on the sleeping bag with a white sheet shrouding her frame, all foreshortened like Mantegna's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* as he opened his eyes in West Berlin. The afternoon before he had been lonely in a line of young people waiting to hitch East. A slingshot across the Iron Curtain. Her seven foot boyfriend had traded places to get to his job on time, leaving him a precious address to stay at. The boyfriend was an apprentice baker. The secret of life was bread, apparently. Rising before the city or the sun. He loved that there was no furniture in their bedroom. Just the wall to wall Berber carpet and beside her sleeping shoulder a pack of filtered Marlboro, a box of condoms, a Zippo.



## Rathmines

The red brick and black wood of the clock tower on the old Town Hall, when this was a separate jurisdiction from the city, looked out along the main street where horses and carriages clattered all day, with flickering light at night. Across the street the neo-classical library with the low dome built with Carnegie dollars. There you climbed the steps as a child and read *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in wood green cloth-bound volumes without understanding anything of how it explained the arguments of the wider family. How your mother, for instance, laid her blonde Irish body against the brown skin of a Eurasian man who was angry all his life. Now, you are living further up the hill, in a flat with your first girlfriend, its single room partitioned with baffle walls. The windowless bedroom is the width of the bed. At night you cling to her softness, her small frame, and have no use for the dawn.

## Museum of Her Last Letter

You were into Manson. Remember the first time we talked you offered to lend me a thick book on the Helter Skelter gang. *The police set him up! He never killed anyone himself!* I kept nodding and smiling. I didn't care. When I try to describe you now it's all a cliché from the sixties: flower child, bell-bottomed jeans, that earnest open oval of your face looking up. The way you skipped in the street even though you were nineteen. Nicole. Nicole. Yesterday would have been your birthday, who never made twenty. That summer I sat at a machine like a mechanical horse. But it did not eat oats from my hand. It spat root bulbs into colorful bags from its metal snout. Bags with pictures of endless Dutch fields of tulips and windmills where nothing grimy could possibly be going on. This must be how the Dutch imagined heaven. I folded down the top of each bag just so and cinched it. When I went on a cigarette break the Turkish families kept going. Mothers, fathers, children, all tending the horses. Outside in the slant shade of the factory I watched cows walk along the top of the dyke, between earth and sky. In the evening, an oily vegetable soup from a can sitting on the ground in one of those Dutch fields. Someone started playing a guitar a few tents away as it grew dark. What did we drink then? How did the conversation go? What was the object of desire beyond the object of desire? What did we remember about the future? I opened the letter: *Take care of yourself my scruffy haired boy. We wouldn't want our Jonathan to come home again too tired.*

## At Lublin

What brought the memory back, Radek? The mist  
so low over the city the cell towers seemed ruins  
as if a worker climbing the scaffold would disappear  
halfway up? Maybe it was the singing in the common  
pine trees, which I love –

The harshest season is softened suddenly by love,  
or at least the memory of the beginning of love, that  
confession we put down in song, hoping none will  
notice. Whatever brought it I stepped off the train  
in Lublin twenty-five again, Radek.

Your mother said you'd be back in a few days, I  
should explore the Old Town. There were letters  
from Éilis, always hopeful in the morning –  
her apron, the wire circles of her eyes, that blush,  
the ink from her fountain pen – another life.

After breakfast, heavy with meat and bread, I went  
out to the camp on the outskirts. Miłosz poem  
about the Warsaw Ghetto on my tongue –  
marching up and down the rows of dull barracks,  
yet no grief could come in this day.

The blistered shingles forgotten by the cities.  
The pyramids of children's shoes. But then, Radek,  
it happened - in the shower room I reached up  
and touched a rusted shower head - it was like  
being noticed in a crowd.

## Pigeon Lady

Where several avenues intersect in a star  
she stops, heavy shopping bags swinging  
from stout arms. In the cone of a street light

you would see her, turning bags upside down  
to pour a mush manna at the base of lamp posts.  
Walking home she will stop into cafés to gather

hard baguettes. You called her pigeon lady.  
Like many born and raised in a great city, she seems  
all her life foreign, though her long Russified

family name has softened its ending to *choff*. She  
labors up the *escalier* to her apartment, broad  
shoulders stooped, hair shorn and grey.

And one night, out of the rain and the exhaustion  
she took me with her. As the pot boiled on  
the gas and she sang about the *différence* between

*décoction* and *infusion*, old bread softened in a  
sinkful of water, I picked up heavy gilt frames from  
the dresser, gazed at a girl with black hair and snow

for skin standing with her father to attention, the flat  
swell of her Korean cheekbone, the billow of gauze.  
A blister had festered on the soft arch of my foot,

filled with yellow pus. As I sipped hot tea she took  
a needle, cradled my foot in her warm lap  
and drained the infection, my body remembering how,

as a child, it was carried through air. Her one Holy  
of Holies was Mother Russia. As a young *hôtesse*  
*de l'air* whenever she touched down in a country

beside the Soviets, she would take a day off and  
travel to the border. Just to look at the past, she said,  
made her happy, though she had no wish to go there.

## Muse

At the table in my rented room (I love the faded grandeur of the bay window) scratching with her fountain pen. I prefer her on her knees behind the whitewashed cottage potting pansies. Two days ago she travelled by bus with her youngest across the waist of the island. I can imagine her stabbing me with that pen. The little girl is sleeping. We walk the cobbled streets. Whispers of foreign tongues. It is not the first time. Pawing at each other as her husband slept. One more day I can put her back on the bus. *You're just looking for someone like your father.* She tore the page out of her small notebook and thrust it like a summons. *Do you want to hit me?* Ocean light on the buttons of her dress.

## Pearse's Cottage

I notice it, the effect, let's call it the blazon,  
Morning in October  
Hurrying for the bus with my daughter,  
A patch of sky fallen to the ground on the street ahead,

That rinsed blue which follows rainy night  
With the crown of a tree tinged red.  
A dip at the edge of the street where the alley comes out  
Fills with a mirror after rain despite the city

Gravelling — it takes forever when you call to get that  
Replenished — I stop despite running late, kneel on the blacktop  
To take a picture of the upside down tree and its more  
Mundane original, nudging Cate in off the road

To the grass. We're far enough out  
To have no sidewalks — you feel like you're in the  
Country — Every fall I forget this  
How things change and their semblance returns.

That evening when we come back she wants to play  
At throwing stones in the puddle so I stand guard,  
Speeding cars in the cross street and dusk,  
As she stoops over and judiciously selects the perfect

Piece of gravel to fling to her temporary pond.  
There was more time in summer.  
When there were showers we stood here  
The persistence of light testing trajectories at this disappearing

Reappearing pool. A word comes back from my mother  
Lode: *turlough*. A lake which disappears in summer  
Down through the limestone in the west of Ireland.  
The winter I was twenty-eight, out in Connemara

With my first wife, Anne — she dyed her hair red then —  
One grey afternoon we crossed a bog, laughing as we stumbled  
freezing — I think we even brought a picnic for God's sake —  
Working our way around the loch to visit the cottage.

Pearse shot in 1916. All locked up, we could only peer in  
The square window at a bare table, admire the thatch,  
The whitewash, eat our sandwiches in the chill. I hated him  
In history class. His certainty, patiently instructing his pupils

Until he opened fire in the center of the city. One thing I forgive  
Him though: In all the photographs he turns his face to the right,  
Hiding a tremor in his eye. That vanity I know.

## First Night

I held your stomach sitting on the bar  
of the bike as we freewheeled down the dual

carriageway from Belfield, past Donnybrook  
Church, over the low weir of the Dodder, then

Lansdowne Road, the stadium, the river  
becoming tidal. In the living room,

the gas fire, the cheap carpet scatterplot,  
and childhood's end: the salt of your tongue.

Years with no contact would not change the show,  
what burned at nineteen annotated now.

I saw a picture: you gesturing on  
a stage, the same kinetic energy

still in your small hands, wrapping the brown hair  
round your ears to listen with all intent.



## History

Through a window,  
suddenly it's snowing  
blossoms from a tree.

When you speak  
I close my eyes  
and follow you.

After my mother left,  
I watched Lassie every afternoon  
in black and white.

I would be the scissors  
and the curling iron  
bending your hair.

Downshifting,  
I pedal uphill,  
breathing hard.

For months now  
Venus has been  
magnificent.

We do archaeology, don't we?  
The girl with the Aran fisherman's  
woven belt, who despised you.  
The colored threads of Peru.

Babel.  
Cranes.  
Workers staring out of windows.

I thought she was being a bitch,  
voice trembling, impatient, tears almost.  
Turned out she had an MRI scheduled.

Then there was that hospital in London.  
The dental nurse with the freckles  
you brought the files to.  
Then went back to the basement.

### **III. Fishing the Rappahannock**

## Quiddity

The campground on the lake was straight  
Out of Hitchcock, he'd have set a scene  
By that stone jetty, no question: A blonde  
Diving into ice water, someone troubled  
Who doesn't make it to the final act,  
But you remember her,

Her makeup

In disarray, the camera framing the mountains,  
Above the ripples of her wake, triangles  
Overlapping triangles on the farther shore.

It's hard to not believe in something made  
Out of light.

I walked down to the water.

When you look at a great mountain, dressed  
In thousands of trees, and your eye slides down  
The digital jag of the slope of treetops to the water  
Edge, there is always precisely and only  
One final tree, a sentinel.

Checking in at the camp store, the children hugged  
A black bear, who helpfully pointed the way  
To breakfast. Our little mock Alpine cabin:  
The steepness of its sides made me think of a food  
Pyramid –

Mollie and I could be all cereal and pasta

Downstairs, when the kids were fish and nuts in the loft.

We went off to swim. Well, Ben swam. He does not  
Feel the coldness that is in things. The rest of us  
Were shocked by the current of melting glacier  
From somewhere in the interior.

He dropped his red

Snorkel mask, his favorite, and it sank to the green rocks  
And he came out in tears, unable to retrieve it. I hurried  
Into the bracing pool. A rare moment of chivalry.

## Fall Again

On the neighborhood lawns mushrooms have been flourishing from days of rain, white caps cascading over the green before the variations of Cape Cods, where the flags are changing now from sand castles to red leaves and squirrels. I show a picture to Roman at the office: some kind of *Armillaria mellea*, he thinks, the honey fungus, a delicacy his brother used to hunt for in the woods outside Moscow. Decay in root or bark give then the impetus to build these wild pagodas before dawn. A shift in air or moisture and next day the architecture will be gone, no vestige, just a beautiful haunting.

Before the neighbors get home  
I kneel by the curb, noticing the silence newcomer to the year: no air conditioning, cicadas all washed out, the fallen limbs already cut and stacked, waiting for the city. Each year you come back in a different way. I look for you. Here in this convex flesh the bread white cheek of the Irish girl I knew. Your Northern face with its pale skin can be hard to find in the color, in the South. I have grown up without you and my knees hurt now. You would have helped me to stand up, leaning on your thin shoulder, laughing.

## yard work, late spring

the slats are weathered  
leaning  
unmoored post  
I will not press my hand and jump

all afternoon I pull succulent weeds  
massing kneeling  
in the high sun a penitent

your face is always with me you know  
your chin split in the womb like mine  
in pictures we raised our hands to hide it

there is the cardinal the pale one  
a zip line from tree to tree  
she's not happy with any branch

the children's voices  
bring me back

## North Fork

The river makes a heart beat on the map for a hundred miles,  
but only cuts into the clay for three or four or five feet,  
rising to the rib cage or the shivering chin. A boy and girl

hold hands, paper dolls, barefoot across the green  
edge, large black Os slung on their bare backs, inflated  
in the wood shed up the slope. They do not notice the dark

tangle of overgrowth in a rough rectangle of the field,  
slowly erased summer by summer since John died,  
and his vegetable garden fell. Vestiges remain though:

a brave tomato plant in the scribble of grasses and a single  
incandescent sunflower. The cousins descend  
iron steps and launch on the water, bronze legs

and torsos folded into inner tubes, stalks in a bouquet,  
they spin downstream, trees reaching for the double  
Earth, the dragonflies come close, yet refuse the mirror.

At a concrete bridge they will wade ashore and walk back  
again, each turn of the road a levelling.

## Fishing the Rappahannock

Downstream, the river mouth opening  
onto morning light caught in the bay.  
I cling to the handrail's chrome, hanging

above the white churn of the wake. Buoys  
mark the channel like Apollo command  
modules splashed down in the seas of childhood.

We cut the engines, halt in a surge of foam.  
I hold up the lure to the wind, it turns like a mobile,  
its tiny mirrors trembling. The state trooper with us

cuts bait, shows me how to thread it on the lure.  
I flick my wrist, send it off into the far depths.  
The trooper says, *my first wife was like that, too.*

He wipes the blood from his hands with a rag,  
reaches into the cooler for a beer.  
What was weightless grows heavy.

I reel in a creature from another world.  
It sways in front of me, its eyes large, staring, lidless.  
The deep mouth, the evanescent rainbow of the scales.

The trooper says, *she just kept pushing and pushing.*  
I grasp the body with a rag, pull the hook from its lip,  
fling it overboard.

## Meeting My Father after 36 Years

I had a few minutes so I browsed the books and magazines. Among the simulations of sex and the mystery of murder I found a cheap

edition of *Four Quartets* and so that is what I posted on Facebook about, about how you could turn to any page and find an eternal

resonance of this difficult moment in your life,  
*while the light fails on a winter's afternoon,  
in a secluded chapel, history is now and England*

or whatever. And I turned away from the electric blaze of newsagents and walked to *Arrivals* and embraced my seventy-six year old father

- not love you understand, just its portrayal -  
astonished now to be much taller than he in his leather jacket, colorful suspenders, and slicked

back hair, and we went over to the car rental counter where he argued and flirted with a woman for twenty minutes while I made awkward

polite conversation with his wife.



## Thanksgiving

What's the hell's a turducken?  
you asked her, planning the meal  
on the phone, your calf folded underneath  
you on the sofa in that way I hungered for,  
as if you were a stone goddess  
limbs broken off in a glass case,  
but your knee rubbed smooth  
by generations of hopeful women.  
Marjie though, always wanted the Baroque.  
It wasn't enough that Bernini's angel  
is standing on the cloud about to gut  
Teresa – there had to be actual gilded  
stucco rays illuminating the whole thing,  
like that year she insisted on putting  
walnuts in the *crème brûlée* and God  
if Michael didn't bring his blow torch!  
Now she was going all medieval,  
with one deboned fowl devouring another –  
engastration was the bloated term.  
We hadn't told her yet about the pregnancy.  
No wine because you had a head cold.  
Charcoal circles under your eyes.  
You looked at me pleadingly in the middle  
of the evening, your hands cut off  
in the dishwater, but that's only how I  
imagine the grief. The wave of blood  
pulled by the moon. The big story that year  
was how Marjie got up early and let  
the dog out and he found the leftovers  
in a styrofoam cooler on the stoop  
and she had to chase him all over  
the back yard in her nightie to pull  
the turducken out of his throat. It was  
the most thrilling moment of his dog life  
and he crapped for three days after.  
That winter in the Visual Arts Center  
you took lessons in stained glass,  
learning with pain how to piece color  
together with solder.

## Procedure

The hospital campus squeezed in  
where the interstate makes a paperclip  
bend. Suburbans moving in an ice flow.

The White House of the Confederacy swallowed  
like a puzzle piece. You can walk (waiting  
for the operation, needing air)

the edge of the - *what is it called down here,*  
*a porch, a portico, a parapet?* - just columns and gaps  
opening into space,

where the boy fell.

My daughter wakes, body contorted,  
flinging her arms and legs at the gunwales

of the bed, pleading with someone in the spirit world,  
eyes hooded, a voice more urgent than ours. Mollie  
crawls onto the mattress, wraps her legs around,

her arms around, her cheek to the girl's summer  
cropped hair, puts her back into her body for long minutes,  
until the anaesthetic wanes.

We have loved her  
since the curve of her forehead in the sonogram,  
an outline like that portrait by Antonio del Pollaiuolo

in Berlin – you know the one, the surprise of the Gothic  
taste for a raised hairline, which shows the beauty of the bone  
beneath.

Cate will not remember this excision,  
her umbilical hernia. The same building she dropped  
into the kneeling midwife's upraised hands. The confusion,

the waking to ordinary light.

## On My Brother

The tablets lined up like spices: *Bystolic*, *Lisinopril*, *Atorvastatin* - the same angry blood my father had. My six year old wonders why I pull this drawer out in the morning, even before the drone of the coffee maker. I tell him my heart has problems with the speed of time. I just flew back from San Francisco, an office meeting off Embarcadero, the mist on the Bay when I slip away from sessions. Met up with my half-brother and his girlfriend for dinner in North Beach, which is not the beach of course, and whiled away the hour before the meal at City Lights, Ferlinghetti's store, I can't believe he's still alive, the shelves even more insistent than the books. I was proud of my brother that he put his arm round his girl, when the tiramisu came.

## Elegy for Laura

Those evenings before the children were born, I'd stop by  
coming home, move piles of newspapers, sit for hours  
drinking bourbon showing off, you laughing the way  
a parent would, or a lover.

Every surface was covered. Small wicker baskets stuffed with pennies, tape measures, plastic  
date planners, coils of stamps that would never fly. Unopened bills staring through their window  
panes, magazines with sunbathing girls from last summer still wrapped in plastic.

All stories led you to tell one about Charlie. In your rocking  
chair you went back to Oak Ridge, the young  
wife in tow to the brilliant scientist. Inside every atom  
the end of the world.

At faculty cocktail parties flirting with other men's wives, pleated tweed skirts, flared pants like  
the rockets going up to lullaby space, unnecessary buttons, empty pockets on blouses. And when  
your second girl came along he left. I used to tell you, you never come to terms.

Stuck in the age of retreat, never learning the next trick,  
a decade of bad taste and war, always talking about the ex  
who went out west, found spirituality in the desert,  
but still blew his brains out in the end.

It was funny how I was the younger counseling the older. How much does love let go? Now that  
you're gone the apartment is struck like stage scenery, all the clutter. Your furniture to refugees.  
And your beloved detective books and Regency pulp to thrift stores.

Miss Judy at the church took the plants, the knitting supplies.  
Vince came by with his brother to patch the holes in the walls  
where I'd hung those pictures a decade ago no one actually  
looked at (they weren't that good).

All the first week since your passing (such a long time) I wondered why I felt so vulnerable. As  
if someone might suddenly stop and look at me funny and punch me in the stomach. And they  
wouldn't be wrong. You were the second person I needed.

*The best days, you know, were when we were at Rutgers  
and Charlie was finishing his PhD. He really didn't care  
to go into the city, but I loved it. I'd go in by myself  
at the weekend, see the ballet at the Lincoln, or a play  
on Broadway. I'd buy a hotdog from one of those street  
vendors and just walk up Fifth Avenue forever.*

## Retreat Hospital

*Lie back* she says, motioning to the exam bed,  
*lift your shirt*. The ceiling tiles seem to map

our moon I studied as a child: the Sea of crises,  
the Sea of fertility, and my favorite of the maria,

*Mare Cognitum*, “the sea that has become known,”  
named so because we shot a camera at it before I was

born. Trust me to seek a distraction as she rubs  
lubricant on my tummy, spreads a towel, shoves

her ultrasound suddenly into my abdomen  
looking for the recalcitrant liver. I resist pleading

*it hurts*. I turn to where she gazes like a sniper  
at the screen, her bangs a clipped proscenium.

Something about the way her arm presses warmly  
down on my hip, locates me on Earth.

## Alley Light

I go out the laundry room,  
trying not to let the screen door

bang. A light rain settling over  
Christmas. In the alley light

(lonely anchor saint) the gravel,  
the bushes overwhelming fences,

the thoughtful emptiness,  
suggestions of a country lane,

a *boreen*, back home.  
It's no wonder

I'm sentimental tonight,  
slipping away to finish the swing

set in my neighbor's garage.  
I lay out the hollow tubes

on cardboard sheets  
on the concrete floor

my knees feeling the penance  
as I tighten nuts and bolts.

When I need to stretch I wander  
into her studio next door,

where an old dog stares solemnly  
out of a small canvas,

each brush stroke so deliberate  
it must be some kind of devotion.

Later I lift the A-frames –  
surprised how easy it is

to balance so unwieldy a thing  
when your hand is in the right place.

## Visitation

Sunday afternoon, the children jittery  
for the pool, storming the sofa in swimsuits  
as you pack snacks, lotions, floaties  
I would forget. August has only so many days left.  
Cicadas – their referee whistles blowing under the trees  
the car pulling away from the curb. We wave.  
I go with a drinking buddy to the funeral home –  
his fast car slung low despite a wife and daughter –  
I struggle to climb out. The attendants eye us  
in the vestibule – were we meant to be here -  
point our steps over the carpet to the visitation.  
The young woman taken quickly by cancer  
is an effigy in an open casket, the frills on her  
dress from another time, a death mask of herself  
more at peace than the laughing wedding  
and childhood photos on easels round the room.  
Her girlfriends are in their summer dresses –  
only people on television wear black -  
bright bold colors of this year – crying - as if  
the scenes in photographs could change.

## Under the Shade of Live Oaks

We get there late. Drive back and forth on the same stretch of graveled road – how many times before we find the right log cabin? We become fractious with worry. The headlights catch a fox, a skunk, a rabbit, a stand of cactus, a mother deer and her baby. I fumble with the lockbox, imagine for a moment not getting inside, and then the barrels turn and it clicks open.

Carefully I carry her ashes in from the car. Later, when everyone is sleeping – the children, Mollie, her sister and boyfriend – I slip outside and walk back up the trail for a clearer view. A blurry sash of dust across stars I do not often see. Unsure it's not just a low lying sandbar of cloud in the dark air.

After breakfast I watch over Ben and Cate, playing on the scree of rocks running down to the water's edge, the others gone in to town in search of SIM cards that work. It is pleasant to be cut off from the world in this grove of live oaks. The breeze from the water climbs the rocks. The sunlight on the water signals through branches. In winter I will think of these days.

Verna arrives from Hohenwald, Tennessee. Sitting on rockers on the back porch she tells a story about two young women with children trying to drive to a beach for the weekend but they broke down in a small town in southern Texas. She struggles to remember the name. Mollie and Susan join in the search, and their cousin from Alabama. The potato salad is the best.

The sun has shifted now, gone round to the front of the house. The unnamed town did not have a garage and the women were going to be stuck there all weekend until a man getting gas called some neighbors and they come over and towed the car to a nearby farm and then called some men from another town and they come over and started fixing the engine.

*And Kay went up to the house and asked the wife if she could make some soup for everyone and so that's what we did. That was a good soup. I wish I had the recipe. Did they ever get to the beach? But that wasn't the point. A chance event let her evoke the character of her dead friend, smile about her youth. The food in our laps seemed to be the same as the story.*

By dusk the women were in full flight. Years were passing by. I set up a little teepee of logs in the fire pit, getting ready for s'mores for the cousins, flitting in the trees like last night's deer. My first attempts, as usual, smoldered out. The little rockets of paper turned to ash. Women are laughing. I douse it in gas, lean too close with the lighter, a fireball buffets my face.

Hours later it's just me and Charlie drinking. No more boats passing in the dark. He knows baseball, writes about it for a local paper out in Sonoma. Kay loved baseball. The Texas Rangers she couldn't always get on cable in Virginia. She went to a few games with Charlie when she went out to visit. A true believe speaks of the game as if it offers insight into life.

At some point I have to go to bed. I still need to write some notes for the memorial service. I'll do that down at the dock in the morning. The cicadas stay up as I go in. I turn off the window unit in the bedroom. Prefer silence. Turn and turn on the cheap mattress in my boxers. Try to remember, as you fall asleep, what it was that once made you happy.



## At the Hoh Rain Forest

When Roosevelt was shot  
the bullet bored the fifty pages of his speech  
twice, *Progressive Cause Greater Than Any*

*Individual*, folded in his pocket.  
We drove up from the coast  
in the afternoon, the dry land

enduring with nothing built. The river spilt  
along the split rocks, slate blue, white white,  
water clouded by dust, mountains

pounded in the mortar of ice. A herd flopped  
on the far bank. Cars pulled over. That summer  
young women wore jean shorts ripped or hemmed

and carried telephoto lenses. *The Roosevelt elk!*  
The reason this place exists in time.  
Happy in the sun and mud. I wanted

to stop, but crowds are not your thing.  
I see myself sulking in the window till the ranger  
station, missing the forest now wrapping

its mosses round the limbs, no longer lecturing  
the children. The vacation waned.  
My anxiety in parking lots is worse than

the open road: I expect a sudden rolling crush.  
Looking up along the wooded slope  
before we entered I thought of Dante,

Canto I - No escape. No air conditioning  
in the children's play room, just a log cabin,  
and a fake bear, and you moving about in the bathroom.

But in the exhibition hall I find the cross-section  
of a giant cedar, a tiny flag planted near its center  
the *Mayflower* sailing into Provincetown.

## **IV. The Legion of Honor**

## Walking on Jane Austen

My mother's older sister in the tea  
shop line procession. *Lunch is essential  
first, then the cathedral!* Unclasping her  
handbag she declares we should all choose what  
we want. I could not take my eyes from her  
earlobes at the cash register, the drag  
of that cross, the silver weight. A few days  
later, back in London, Mollie will have  
a miscarriage and I'll feel guilty we  
didn't take a cab from the station, I  
was *so* bloody eager to sightsee. We

walk the nave and the stone vaulting seems too  
high – what's all that space above your head for  
anyway? I scan the lines, apertures –  
crane my neck, slouch in the flow of tourists –  
here was the generation of all power  
whereas now it's some shining turbine hall  
roaring in far off Ontario - a  
hydroelectric dam – but then I step  
on her - a brass plaque inlaid in the floor,  
the worn flagstones absorbing her in the  
widening pattern. Wasn't she with child

when she died? My auntie, Betty, catches up,  
peers down with me at the golden polish.  
I glance over at her thin hair, want to  
brush my hand along its spun gray stiffness.  
*Ah, Jonathan. I remember reading  
Sense and Sensibility as a girl.  
Your mother was such a Marianne, my  
heavens!* I love this criticism, made  
in admiration. We turn, her arm in  
mine tight, shuffling through echoes and incense  
towards the bright, the broken rose.

## The Legion of Honor

The weight of the swung vessel must have been too much for her thin arms as it cracked against stone. Is her gaze then embarrassment or fury? I felt awkward standing there in front of her.

You've seen that peasant girl with calloused toes by Bouguereau – the sort they slip on to a box of chocolates - sitting by a water pump, a broken pitcher at her feet, a green glaze round the neck.

It's so hard not to read meanings into things. For I cannot unlearn the slants I have read, iconographies of yield and desire. And I cannot remove my eye. I'd walked the city

from my Chinatown hotel toward the ocean. Like Balboa crossing Panama. In Portsmouth Square old men played chess with the same rules as forever. The painting is theatrical. The stone

wall housing the pump shaped into a subtle throne for the girl, one knee raised under the skirt to press against her folded hands, her shawl a grid of reds and gold, the scene behind her

not a real country. I turned away for the courtyard cafeteria, a waiter moving between a Greek goddess and some flowering planters, balancing a sandwich and a bottle of beer on a tray.

## Two Puddle Farm

Heading north on the interstate, the sun  
snagged in a blaze of sticks, I slide  
my black book into the map pocket, peer  
across at what's vanishing, reach  
to rub my wife's thigh, tense from driving  
in the dark. Somewhere near  
the abandoned slopes of Shawnee  
Land Ben needs to use the bathroom,  
so we pull into a gas station, lit  
like a fridge door opened in the night,  
but have to piss in the trees out back,  
where a chorus sings beyond the  
headlights, a mystery. Ten minutes  
from the broken mailbox at the turnoff  
for the farm Cate throws up in her seat,  
a memory she may long retain.

Fifteen years we have visited, the lines  
of the garden fences, tangled with forsythia,  
still converging to an apex the horses  
wander over the pastures to, begging  
for apples. I follow the fence line  
inspecting the fruit trees - the dwarf apple,  
the Seckel pear - I remember you  
planting. How proud you were, showing  
them off at that long ago party for your dad's  
eightieth, when he joked with the teasing  
mandolin player he wouldn't invite him  
back for his ninetieth. The dogs question  
my work. Different dogs, different horses.  
Everyone drinking on the porch now  
after a late night, dazed by the drone of flies,  
as I climb the gate and head to the barn.

Rough hewn the beams of its gloom, where  
once a day Canadian horses stamp in  
from the muddy yard through a door of light  
seeking warm mash and flakes of hay.  
Here, you and Bob, your longest lasting and  
last boyfriend, held court by lantern and fiddle  
in those Halloween parties, once famous.  
Ever the farm girl, despite your PhD, your  
plump arms and apple cheeks, your vinagery  
humor and laughter like the sound of newborn

lambs, kept Bob, plain Bob, much older Bob, younger at heart. Bob the hippie, Bob the sculptor, Bob the thin rake of a man it was hard to believe you did not snap in two with your love. His body did not seem to have enough bones in it, as if he himself was a rangy work by Giacometti.

Once he took me to his tumbledown farmhouse to see his studio. It was good you two did not live together. A woman who works for the Humane Society of the United States now owns the property and I could hear the yelp of a rescued turkey coming across the pasture, see a pot bellied pig standing in profile by the fence – I almost thought it was one of his sculptures left over. I admired the way he bolted, hammered, soldered heavy rusted pieces of old farm machinery into the bodies of women and strange animals – such grace. A new sculpture sitting on the studio floor, her hydrolic legs folded under her so that they appeared to end at her knees. She might have been a mermaid. She was balanced on one beautiful twisted arm, an example of *contrapposto*.

## Rampart

That morning at the castle I stood at the parapet of a little sheltered courtyard between the habitable Renaissance wing, where the wedding guests were staying, and the picturesque medieval ruins. Here people hung out at breakfast or drinking late into the night. The view looked out across the valley into the warm lap of the hills this house once ruled. I sat on the parapet with a bowl of coffee and looked down. Below, a path wrapped round the base of the fortifications leading to a farmhouse built with salvaged stones from the tumbledown medieval wing and towers. An eccentric lived there, who reputedly has a cadre of Thai - what to call them - *exercise assistants*! I noticed a woman, wearing a broad brimmed straw hat, down on her hands and knees, clearing weeds out of a small flower bed set on the precipice by the path. I watched her edit that mid-air littoral for many minutes. She could not see me, I could have been an angel watching her. None of the others smoking (the Leeds contingent!) or drinking coffee on the terrace could see her. Maybe she was cleaning that superfluous flower bed of her own imprisoned volition? No one would ever look at it with this sublime landscape to behold. But, as you read this, she alone is all you wonder about. And that is art.

## Husbandry

Dew light bends down on one knee to search his face,  
walking past rows of tomato plants, beans, beets, lettuces,

and cabbage. Not forgetting peas. He loves the arrow shot  
of this terrace, dug and etched from the mountain like

the lines drawn with ruler and compass on the continent.  
Sometimes he wishes though the sun would find him

sleeping in his narrow bed and his small wife back  
from the dead with her hands holding his cheekbones.

He misses that intensity, gazes still at her coal black  
silhouette in the south square room from time to time.

The heat burns the mist from the Piedmont floor and  
the peace of his misery is broken now by the hollerings

of overseer and driver, driving him back up to his study,  
where a young servant woman brings in a silver tray.



## S. Cherry St.

*Icarus Fallen*

(Nils Westergard, 2015)

She is painted on a brick wall  
in the little courtyard behind  
the restaurant. Her brow is tilted  
up near the roofline, her navel  
knot sunk below the blacktop  
where the kitchen staff park,  
pushing the hoods close to her  
dark nipples, cloaking her  
as I cycle past. Her magnesium skin,  
the modeling of her face, the shadows  
under her breasts are just a wash  
over the baked clay grid  
of the alleyway wall. You approach  
this young giantess and the chute  
of her sternum turns into a map  
of the *Old Northwest Territory*,  
empty counties imagined on the skin  
of America newly rampant and free.  
Is this for my gaze only?  
Why is she imprisoned in this  
courtyard? And who is Icarus? A bird  
dead beside her, feathers tinted  
azure as the blush on her stern face.  
We ask these questions  
only when there is an object.  
The muralist said he did not paint  
clothes on his women because he  
did not want them trapped in time.  
Do I read her severity?  
The punishing goddess, the hooding  
of her eyelids, no hint of a smile  
in the line between her lips, no eye  
contact, and cruelest of all, that  
domed forehead, a simple *S Curve*,  
a contrapposto of the skull, which  
reminds me of her. And this is how  
art torments.

## Open House at the University Art School

The flyers in the stairwell imitate  
mimeographs with forced ink and fervor.

Students speak *sotto voce* and eat  
cubed pineapples and salt bagels, demure.

I am a jewel thief entering  
the cell of each new artist – found objects,

drawings of sex, gilded leaves asking  
attention. The stench of turpentine lets

beauty keep its truth. But one girl – woman –  
sidestepping out to let me squeeze in, laughs,

*I'm making my small studio even  
smaller!* A zinc sink hauled from an alleyway

capsizes on her workbench, its plumbing slit.  
The beached mass-produced object becoming

another clean thing set free.

## Miró at Varengeville

I want to get at your impulse that evening  
Painting the windowpanes of the studio  
Blind with blue gouache obeying the blackout

With a wry grin. The war would touch  
Everything except the sky you loved  
Longingly to wonder at through a frame.

Pilar gazing out of your wedding photograph  
On the work bench in the lamplight  
With the same intensity as yourself sitting

Beside her on a battered couch, her hand  
Playing some chord on your arm, a look  
Which could search the crowd and all

Harrowing. She kept always the picture  
You started that night, tearing a sheet  
From the pad, fifteen inches by eighteen,

Dark lines joining the geometry, primary colors,  
The blur of background which soothes the eye,  
The curve of a cheek, eyes eyes everywhere,

Suggestions of bodies swaying in a new heaven.  
This work sustained you in that short exile.  
The last day it was all you took, rolling up

The sheets to carry under your arm  
As Pilar held Dolores's hand and you all  
Boarded the last train into the South.

## Firebird

*George Balanchine and Gelsey Kirkland  
(Patrick Grehan, 1970)*

Everyone's in bed.  
The whole summer island  
Is sleeping in the Sound.  
I'm rifling through the random  
Books behind knickknacks on  
The shelves of the faux chalet.  
The dancer turns her head,  
The way a bird can ratchet,  
Scoping along her shoulder  
At the photographer,  
But drops her eyes, seeing  
Some weakness in his stance,  
The obviousness of desire,  
Perhaps. The hand of the  
Tyrant reaches  
From the shadows  
To touch her red wing,  
Scorching his fingers.  
What fun he is in chiaroscuro,  
His nose only lit  
Like the beak of a falcon.  
His nose and his hand,  
That hand feeling the heat  
But holding steady  
As you must, that close.  
Surely to Christ you would, too.  
The photographer has indicted  
Him as the sorcerer in the tale,  
Visiting the little orphan  
Maryushka, in the body  
Of a young man stolen. And  
Yet she rejects him, sitting  
Patient stitching her artful  
Needle work.

                    His talons swipe  
At her skin which erupts  
Into feathers.

                    I drop the bound  
Volume of *Life* stories on  
The sectional sofa, and take my  
Drink out into the garden. The  
Fruit trees are fenced off

From the deer who show up often  
In the driveway and although  
The stars are bright enough tonight  
To see the track of the Milky Way,  
My face is cloaked in shadows.

# **Leaving Home**

A Memoir

Jonathan U. Barton

## The Dog Left Behind

My father told my younger brother Dex this story on his deathbed. One day when our father Kenneth was four years old the Japanese airforce started dropping bombs on the town they lived in, in Burma. Panic ensued. The invasion had been expected but we never want to believe the worst will happen. We never want to believe the worst will happen *to us*. The British and their families put knives and forks into suitcases, climbed into black cars or wagons or carts, and headed to the Indian border. Servants followed them, helping to keep the children quiet and calm. Others abandoned their cars at the train station and pushed in through all the doors of the carriages. How much of this my father remembered and how much of this became family stories is hard to say. His family was large and complicated. The unpredictable patriarch, Joseph, whose occupation on one of his marriage certificates is boldly written as *Ticket Inspector*. His third wife, the loyal school teacher, who never had children of her own but was a mother to my father. The older sisters from the first marriage. Passionate debaters and story tellers they. Dad described, in a terrible memoir he wrote after one of his heart attacks, how one of the girls instinctively shielded his body as the Japanese bombs exploded on the town. Their names are all flowers from the Edwardian era, flowers which grew back in England, not in those tropical hills. Then there were the full brothers and sisters of my father, whose mother had died giving birth to him. That's another couple of moving documents I've collected over the years with the help of a Mormon friend: my grandmother Kathleen's burial date, in elegant cursive, on her death certificate being just one day after the date on my father's birth certificate. All these legal pieces of writing were assembled in ledgers by officials of the Empire and each quarter copied by hand and shipped to England. So that England knew its own. Just as surely as the Emperor Augustus had ordered a census to be taken of the whole world the year of Jesus's birth. But the Romans

perhaps, no matter what you might say about them, were more relaxed when it came to questions of race. The British in the colonies were only interested in the children of Europeans, which meant *white*, or the mixed race children of Europeans and Asians, known by the term *Eurasian*, like my father. The Barton clan naturally hurried to the train station and managed to board the last train out of the hills. It was not the British army in its three wars in the nineteenth century against the old Burmese Empire which completed the conquest. It was the railroad. The railroad that stitched and subdued the land. Now one empire was routing another along that same iron road. The ticket inspector was fleeing west. My father told my younger brother Dex this story on his deathbed. Kenneth had had a pet dog in Burma. Everyone in the family loved that dog, but they could not take it on the train and he was forced to abandon it at the station. The dog, whose name literally meant love in Arabic, followed the train for miles as it chugged slowly away. When they crossed a river bridge the dog could not follow and stood looking after them until they turned a bend. *And that is why when you were a child I could never let you have a dog in England*, my father said to Dex on his deathbed. But. I'm not sure I believe the story. Our father was not just an unreliable narrator, he was a con man, a chance artist. But why on his deathbed in Tonbridge would he make up a lie of an excuse about an old disappointment in my brother's childhood? To generate sympathy for himself would be my cynical answer. A lifetime of playing all the angles and the sand was running out. But here's the thing. The stories we tell and the choices we make in them tell a lot about us, whether the facts are really facts or not. I cannot help feeling the lost dog on the riverbank is my father himself. And I do not want to leave him behind.



## My Mother

I leaned over the balcony at intermission. Hundreds of people were drifting below. To slake a thirst, to relieve a bladder, to talk animatedly with two or three others, so that their voices rose and wove collectively into a roar, which broke against the restored Moorish tiles and glass of the ceiling. Some sat alone in the crowd. I could see the tops of their heads. Staring down into tiny bright pools in their hands. Enchanted looking glasses, such as some abandoned mermaid might stare into to understand why she was forlorn. I turned to look upwards along the precipitous raked aisles and caught sight of my wife. She was returning to her seat chatting with one of our friends. It struck me how young and pretty she still is. I still say *sheaf of wheat* silently when I catch sight of her unexpectedly like this (she has a short haircut at the moment, but not too short). Our friend is six months pregnant so that her purple woolen dress is stretched into the shape of a comically large pear and she comes down the dangerous stairs slowly with a frozen grin, as you do when your body and your mind are doing separate tasks. Just as they arrive back they see me and we begin to talk about the musical, a revival of that tired old seventies classic Chicago musical *Chicago*, based on the sensational book from the twenties about women murderers in the Jazz Age getting off with the aid of crooked lawyers and a celebrity intoxicated popular press.

I had never seen it in the seventies, on the stage. And yet I might have, because whenever I visited my mother in London she always took me to shows in the West End. It was one of the things we did together. I was always proud when I'd go home to Dublin, to my grandparents who were raising me. I'd show off in the school yard about all the cultural activities I got up to in the Metropolis. The latest James Bond movie, the museums in South Kensington, feeding the pigeons in Trafalgar Square. I compensated for my feeling of inadequacy. At not being raised by

my mother. Or my father, who was long gone. Even then I associated my unhappiness with the idea that my misfortune was to be stuck in a provincial city, far from the bright lights.

Somewhere else was the center of the world. But wait. I'm jumping ahead. I'm writing this down days after the thought began. I'm collapsing the tunnels. I didn't think of my mother that night at the *Broadway in Richmond* traveling show. That night I thought about my wife. She wasn't laughing at the show. I got into the spirit of it a bit. If you were one of my friends there that night and you didn't know I was there, you would have figured it out at some stage hearing my raucous laughter from the balcony. It is a distinctive feature, my uncouth laughter. I'm even proud of it. Sometimes I've used it like a weapon. Anyway it's not unusual for Mollie not to laugh at a play or a movie. She's a guarded, self-contained person. Her father left when she was very young also but she has handled that disappointment differently than I did. She is slow to be impressed by something. She was too tired later that night when we went into our children's bedrooms to check on them, too tired to talk about the show. Our little girl with her fingers in her mouth and bright cheeks of her mother. Our older boy sprawled, a scheme on his sleeping face, snoring loudly like his dada.

I didn't think of my mother that night. But a few days later I did ask my wife what she thought of the show and she expressed repugnance for it, which is rather strong for her. I'm the one who normally expresses opinions with an extremity to them. She's a very tolerant reasonable person. She didn't know why these hard bony women were walking around in their supposedly sexy underwear for the entire performance, engaged in in-your-face sexual suggestiveness with their writhing and dancing. Of course she got the vaudeville and jazz idiom but still, the purpose escaped her. She doesn't like meanness. Especially if there's anything intimate about it. I still didn't think about my mother.

It has been a long winter. The temperatures have stayed low. Snow has come down and lingered. There have been many days in February and March when you could slip on an icy patch of old transmuted snow which has been there waiting for many days to catch you. One day you step over it carefully. The next you forgot and suddenly you're moving through space like a dancer, only you don't know the steps and you grab hold of yourself. How easy it would be to break something. You've commiserated with people at the office, their arms wrapped up in white like mummies, or their foot encased in a black boot so that they hobble along the way you imagine Lord Byron must have, with his club foot. Anyway, now the winter is retreating and the city streets have an edging of sand and staining under the parked cars, like the shoreline of an ugly beach you don't want to linger on. And potholes open up suddenly where there was none yesterday. I've almost wrecked my bicycle wheel a few times, cycling to work or class. A weakness can lie just under the surface for a long time, beaten and weathered. And then one day, when the threat recedes, it collapses and reveals itself. O metaphorical city. It has been a long winter.

And so it was a few mornings later, as I crouched down in our mud room to tie the laces on my runners, which were coated with city sand that I did think of my mother. Again I am leaning over the balcony, clearly feeling distant from all the people I can see below and above. I am somehow envious. It's true I have always been envious of people who can comfortably engage in small talk during an intermission. And in truth, much of life is an intermission. Again I am talking with my wife and friends but they are the ones choosing the conversation. They don't see the streams in my head. Again I am pondering the psychology of my wife through her reaction to a nasty entertainment. Wondering about the relation to her earliest formation. Again I am tired like the city, weary of the winter and having to tie my laces. And I suddenly wonder if

my mother took me to see *Chicago*. Now I'm thinking of my mother. She won't stay long though. That's why I like those passages in Virgil's *Aeneid*, where the Trojan hero Aeneas, in his exile wandering, catches sight of a beautiful young woman who turns out to be his goddess mother, Venus in disguise. She always flees away despite his cries.

The first day arriving in London was always the best. She would be there at the barrier at the airport, or on the platform if I took the train from the ferry to Wales. Hugging her was the most sensual experience of my childhood. Her real fur coat. Her perfume. The stiffness of her hair-sprayed bouffant blonde hair. Driving to her apartment in that eternal mini. I chattered. Everything out the windows was amazing to me and I sang about it. Red pillar boxes instead of green. Zebra crossings. Double-decker buses that opened to the sky. Girls who walked briskly with their legs uncovered. Policemen with a stabbing nipple on the peak of their helmets who did not look unsure of themselves like the red faced country boys back home. At the flat there was the excitement of an electric kettle, a balcony where you could look down on people passing with different colored skins and clothes, a bathroom with glass jars of crystals to dissolve in your bath, a bedroom with shelves mounted on the walls. The only negative thing was her collection of dolls.

She collected them. Porcelain heads with tufts of what seemed like real hair but surely not? And clothes that were tight and old fashioned and full of layers so that it would be difficult to undress one. Did I try? That seems unlikely. At that age (I always seem to be fifteen in these recollections) I had not tried to undress a real girl much less a doll. I remember that even then I did not like her dolls. It seemed incongruous. This woman who had escaped her provincial Catholic country, and fled to the warm lights of London when she was twenty one was the grown up, the sophisticated one, compared to the mothers and young women back home. Why did she

choose this hobby? Why did she collect and curate these unresponsive girls? I had no hint then of the mental illness that would take her to an early grave. No premonition of the fierce burning fires of family quarrels she would provoke as my grandparents died. And the waste of years when she would descend into illness, cut off from everyone, including her only child. But I knew there was something wrong with those dolls. After her funeral they went into black bags.

She loved the theatre. She took me and it was an education. In pleasure. I knew the theatre in the narrow sense of an intellectual hothouse, and I know it in the narrow sense (at least to a youngster) of history – Shakespeare and so on. Growing up in Dublin and going to a private school. That was something my mother had insisted on and she paid the fees which her parents thought was an extravagance. No one in her family had gone to private school. Her mother, my grandmother, the woman who was really my mother since she raised me from the age of one to the age of nineteen when she died on me and left me alone in the world. Her mother had no schooling beyond the age of eleven herself, forced to leave school to help raise her ten younger brothers and sisters on the farm when her mother had died. Yes I know. What an Irish story. Or, what a story from long ago anywhere. Farms, ranches, plantations, villages, shtetls swept away by war and the modern age. Because I was raised by an old woman I have a feeling for that lost age. I didn't relate to young people. So I appeared standoffish.

Anyway. My mother loved *theatre*, the life in it, the sex in it, the song and dance in it. I was used to dry Irish nationalist plays or august historical plays, but she showed me a world of *insouciance* – that was it, that was the thing I couldn't understand back then, that I found cold about the English, that I was cut off from even though I had been born there, and later would yearn to belong there. She began to teach me how to appreciate that life. But we were not fortunate. The timing was off. I was becoming a young young man, and was often difficult and

contrary as young men often are. And we would quarrel. That sounds too decorous, too drawing room. We shouted and got red in the face with one another and I almost expected her to throw something at me, like in those stories about her and my father before they broke up. We fought about things which broke my heart when I reflected on them years later, out of touch. *Broke my heart* is a comfortable clichéd blanket we pull about our shoulders when we recall the shuddering tears of shame that comes with guilty recollection. For instance when I denounced her using all that hair spray to keep her big hair standing that stayed popular all through Margaret Thatcher's tenure in office. I accused her of personally making a hole in the ozone layer above Antarctica. I didn't even realize I was denouncing beauty, as much as a young thug smashing an old statue.

## Weighing Scale

My first marriage ended on a bright September day. The previous day, a Friday, the last day of August, the last work day of summer before the Labor Day weekend, Anne Marie had called me at work and told me to be out of the house by the following evening. She would stay at her sister's house down the street until I was gone. We had been married five years and had been together for a couple of years before that. But for the last six months I had been trying to gather enough courage together, enough certainty, to leave her. Earlier in the week I had behaved in such a way as to crash us through the guardrail of a marriage: I stayed out all night with another woman.

Coming home at dawn, feeling alive all through my arms and neck, and especially the memory of my tongue, my stomach, loins, and thighs, feeling like an animal yes, sated, I turned the key and climbed the carpeted stairs which turned and turned again until I reached the open door of our bedroom. Desire must have a way of short circuiting the higher functions of the brain, and switching off, as well, any compassion for the one who is no longer its object. Anne lay outside the bed cover, wrapped in one of her crazy woman dressing gowns. *Do you see what I did there? What? Your British idiom, "dressing gown" instead of "bathrobe"?* No, the way I covered up with sarcasm the moment I was about to face a painful guilty memory. She liked high necked sweeping embroidered coats, cloaks, cardigans, and bathrobes, as if she was one of her female literary or political heroines she obsessed over. Virginia Woolf in a fur collar, hearing the birds sing to her in Greek, during one of her psychotic episodes. Anne lay there, her eyes enlarged, unnaturally round, sleepless, and deeply hurt. She rose up. Her brown hair she had been growing for the last few years to please me was straight and long and gave her an appearance from another century. Her eyes stared at me the way you would stare accusingly at a

murderer. She had obviously not slept, just as I had not slept, only differently. So that I suddenly had the sickening fancy that she was dead (such feelings come over you in little waves when you stay up all night – it's been so long since I've done that), that she was dead, and facing now her murderer in the underworld. I regretted coming home. I should have made some other effort. Had I thought I could just crawl into bed and go to sleep after such a night and get away with it, postpone yet again any reckoning? Apparently I had. After leaving a hurried lying-sounding message on the answering machine, before leaving the office the previous evening, that I was alright, but that I was going out for the evening and she should not stay up for me, I had rushed over to the Jewish Community Center where I knew M., the sane blond girl I had fallen in love with back in the spring, would go to swim that evening, and loitered in the parking lot to catch her on her way out, her tresses, which I yearned over, crinkled and damp, to argue that we should sometimes see each other even though I still hadn't had the courage to leave my wife, continuing an argument we had most recently engaged in just that afternoon by e-mail. Anne spoke.

“Where were you?”

“I was out walking. I needed to think.”

“You were with her.”

I don't honestly remember if I just told her straight out where I had been, or if I waffled and weaved the way I had been doing the previous six months, so that I was heartedly sick of my own cowardice and neediness. I don't remember but it doesn't matter. She knew everything. I knew she knew everything, so she just repeated the question over and over, her tone rising until she was shouting, advancing on me, the thin frame of her upper body tilted towards me like a shield, her long fingers curled into little fists at her side in a way I used to find endearing.

“Where were you tonight, you bastard!”



Our marital bed, which to my backward gaze seems now like a stage set bed, was positioned in the middle of the room, not touching any of the walls. This had been one of my ideas. We used to be very good at trying out each other's ideas. The bed was a kind of modern abstract four poster, with narrow pine beams rising from the four corners to suspend a pine rectangle, like an empty picture frame high above what bodies would be disposed below. Translucent white gauzy curtains hung from the canopy down the sides and back but were drawn aside with little ties. On the wall behind the bed was a backless narrow bookcase on which were displayed artistic utilitarian objects of no practical use. I was very influenced then by the times I had worked in museums. I was working at the time in fact for a museum association in downtown Washington, D.C. The blond girl M. was the webmaster there. *Oh, an office sex scandal! Don't start.* One of the trendy concepts in the museum field I liked to resist was the condescending attitude to old-fashioned museum displays – “objects in display cases with wall text”, as the standard dismissive formulation put it. “Having an experience” and “the museum as a destination” was all the rage right then, not just going to see old stuff. It was a millennial thing I think, a faint whiff of the end of the world, going out with a bang, not being too concerned about all the things which weren't going to survive anyway. The obsession with computers and virtual reality was probably already having an effect on the attachment to the singular physical object. *Resisting telling the story to hand was obviously also one of the things you liked. I'm getting there. It's hard telling a straight story you know. I'm used to the comfort of poetry, where I can lie and invent, move everything around like a game. Where I can come off as a master of beauty and not just a cad.*

“Where were you?”

Suddenly Anne turned around and rushed to the bookcase. She seized the green metal post office weighing scale from the 1950s and hurled it to the floor. Really this was a beautiful gesture. What are you supposed to do when someone hurts you really bad? The metal box turned as it fell, like a satellite knocked out of orbit, the round glass face - old glass thick like the bottom of a coke bottle – tensed with all the springs within the casing. *Oh come on! You were the first one to complain about that bus falling off the bridge into the river so slowly in “Inception.” And now you’re going to slow mo the weighing scale she smashed the night your marriage ended? Bear with me. I’m thinking on the page here. The real event in the past happened so quickly.* Suddenly Anne turned around and rushed to the bookcase. We’d been together more than eight years at that point. Even after all this time, and both our subsequent lives moving eventually into sunlight, that’s still significant. What could she do at that moment? You may say it’s a gesture that’s too well known. We’ve seen it so often on tv, or read it in books, someone smashing something they would once have cherished, to show their pain and bewilderment. There is a sense in which we act out clichéd scenes when we are really upset or under pressure. We have no original material for that circumstance.

“You fuck!”

She smashed the scale and then she started to wail. She screamed and howled. I stood there not moving. Afraid I think. She doubled down on the floor and screamed and screamed. I don’t know what I was thinking about, if anything. I know I didn’t know what to do. Now revisiting that scene for the first time in a long time I think of the broken scale. I had bought it on a whim in an antique store in Philadelphia where we used to live. It cost \$25 and that was a lot of money to us back then with our non-profit jobs. I’d been circling back to it as we browsed the store and really didn’t think we could afford it. But Anne saw how much I loved it and she made

me buy it. For a long time we had been that way, caring for each other. But the way children care for each other, sometimes impervious to the dangers which surround their actions.

Enough.

## The Breadth of Sackville Street

*Poi si rivolse, e parve di coloro  
che corrono a Verona il drappo verde  
per la campagna; e parve di costoro  
quelli che vince, non colui che perde.*  
Inferno, XV, 123-126

When the package arrived, I could tell it was from Ireland. Even before I turned it round to see the stamps and the customs label. That brown paper wrapping. And too much tape, wound and wound into a carapace. I see my grandfather binding Christmas presents into that kind of straitjacket, for family over in England, when I was a child. I feel it expresses pessimism about surviving intact. Like zipping a jacket up too close to the throat, when you're heading out in a cold rain; or refusing a smile to a stranger, on a night time street. I do it myself still, when I'm wrapping things. The dead are present in these gestures.

It was some books from my friend John in Dublin. He is the curator of our childhoods. We were those awkward boys who palled around together because no one else wanted to: John and his twin brother Martin, Michael (whom we always mocked behind his back and who's big in the supermarket business in a small city in the west of Ireland and has five wonderful children and is the most uxorious of husbands), and Mark (who suffered a breakdown and disappeared from all our radars in our twenties – I've always regretted slapping him on the face in the playground in front of everyone one day when he made a joke about my grandmother: he angered me, but I humiliated him, and humiliation lasts much longer than anger. I see his face red with the blush of the welt and smart).

John, as I say, curates our childhoods. He stays in touch with people or tries to find them. He shares pictures and stories, obituaries and gossip. He reminds us of things we thought we had

forgotten or no one cared about. Like the behavior of eccentric teachers; how we looked when we were awkward boys; or how shops change ownership and use in the streets of the city; or the persistence of the swans and the park benches in Stephen's Green; or what were the hit records when we were first wondering about lust. He posts pictures of the albums from his bedroom, propped up against the turntable. He travels a lot. He was here in Richmond just two years ago and knew the local music scene in a way I never could. We got tickets to the Broadberry one night (near one of the roughest intersections in the city, at Broad and Boulevard) to see a band from Charlottesville I ought to be familiar with. Leaning against the painted wall in the course of the evening, with the light and the bass washing over me, I marveled at his ease in this environment. I might as well have been sixteen again, at my first disco. He moved up into the cluster gathered by the stage, swaying slightly, seeming to listen to a speech I could not interpret. Young women in leather jackets and men in foreign army jackets streamed back from the stage from time to time towards the bar, as if they had received communion and were returning to their pew.

I've never figured out John's sexuality. It's not something we'd talk about. He makes jokes about such things as if he's just quoting from a late night talk show and then guffaws loudly. As if nervous. He really is quite a nervous person. For a long time I'd assumed he was gay. But he's never come out, unlike other friends. His narratives and travels often involve "friends," but nothing of *amore*. It's possible he's asexual, or just very shy that way. It's also possible that I haven't got a fucking clue. The one time he shared a seemingly personal sexual recollection was when he brought up Helen. Goethe says somewhere that you have to pity a poet whose first love is named Helen: burning ships and the topless towers of Ilium and all that. Well, yes.

The first person I was ever besotted with was a girl named Helen. We were at camp, the summer I was, what, eleven? It was an Irish language immersion camp, in Connemara, in West Galway, the sky enlarging at the ocean's edge. Oh, those treeless hills and empty roads, it was a good place for the body to awake. We stayed in farm houses with native speakers and during the daylight hours we were only supposed to speak in Irish. None of that *Sassenach* foreign tongue, mind you.

Ár n-Athair atá ar neamh,  
Go naofar d'ainim

In the evenings though, we were free to speak our own language. And evening in summer at those high latitudes of the isles lasts indefinitely. The clouds darken but the sky itself blushes. We walked to a hall in the village for a *ceili*. Helen was there with her girlfriends. They went to the girls' school around the corner from our Catholic boys' school back in Dublin. She had this tiny denim jacket on and she would not look at me. I would not hazard to remember any of the other physical details at this remove in time. I was going to say that one of her top left incisors was slightly crooked, and that the white enamel breaking ranks like someone crossing their legs demurely, drew the eye in more where the eye was already drawn. But that's a memory of someone else so it's not true. That would have been good though, because that's not a detail you'd find much in new American writing, where all the teeth are straightened from a young age. And interesting flaws removed.

What possible significance could such memories have? Just because they're the first. It's like remembering being born. Before that there were dinners and teeth brushing, prayers to a God believed in, there were conkers in autumn, 99s in summer, and somewhere far overhead the Russians and the Americans found one another and embraced and breathed in the same air. It

was dark in the hall. It was summer. The music playing loudly was not Irish. It was the Bee Gees. Disco. Funky. There was a ball encrusted with mirrors spinning under the ceiling flashing reflections across our bodies. No cross or censer swinging could impress us so. We were little pagans in that hall become Heorot, and I some Beowulf – alright, let's stop that line of exaggeration.

So, John, at the kitchen table in Richmond a couple of years ago, after we got back from the Broadberry late that night, and I'm trying to persuade him about the virtues of bourbon over whiskey, brought up Helen. We were both in touch with her brother, Gerard, who's in the luxury hotel business, and had just finished a stint on the island of St. Lucia. I remarked that Helen had just returned to Ireland after many years in Australia with her husband and three children. And John said we had all had our tongues hanging down to the ground over Helen back in the day. What? I wasn't unique? You're straight? I don't know.

In their twenties, John and Martin lived abroad and tried a number of careers. Martin in real estate on Prince Edward Island in Canada, that his uncle got him started in. There he suffered an injury in a car accident which left him with tinnitus – the persistent sense of hearing a bell ringing where there is no bell. As if it was always time for mass. John had worked in the book trade in London. In the end they gravitated back to Dublin, to their parent's house, with the mock Tudor front, on Sandford Road, and opened a newsagents' shop, literally across the street. There they stood for fifteen years behind the raked rows of chocolate bars, chatting with customers who came in for the daily newspaper, like characters in a Beckett play buried up to their chests. I always loved to visit their house as a child, because their mother would serve

Battenberg cake with tea. It was worth sitting through the moral lectures. She still does. And their father will still bend your ear off about the advantages of learning to speed read, in order to overcome the drag of sub-vocalization. Look at all those tempting metaphors. But this is not meant to be a mockery of childhood friends. And anyway this is not John's story.

The parcel (if it came from the isles my tongue wants to call it a parcel) contained a glossy book about 1916, the centenary of the Rising, published by the Irish postal service and including in the back page a sheet of the commemorative stamps issued to mark 100 years since those violent events. The stamps feature some of the revolutionary figures immortalized by

Yeats:

I have met them at close of day  
Coming with vivid faces  
From counter or desk among grey  
Eighteenth-century houses.  
I have passed with a nod of the head  
Or polite meaningless words,  
Or have lingered awhile and said  
Polite meaningless words

How marvelous, that control and confidence, repeating the phrase "polite meaningless words." To know a thing and when to say it is a skill. To know when to echo it is mastery. John knew my ambivalence about those revolutionaries. To me they were regional traitors, stabbing the British in the back when they were trying to hold the line in France. But this is not the place for my rantings about history and politics, which have more to do with me and my difficult family relationships than anything remotely universal. John sent me the stamps because when I was in High School I was a philatelist. I was a fanatic. Lining up outside the Philatelic Bureau for hours on the morning of a new release in order to buy gutter-pairs, plate blocks, miniature sheets, or to



customize my First Day Covers. Always hoping to obtain a stamp with an error in the printing, before anyone knew what the error was. A misprint was the most valuable lure of all. Just think of the “Inverted Jenny,” that gorgeous red twenty four cent stamp from 1918 with the accidental upside down airmail plane that flew from Washington, D.C. to New York City. We all wanted one of those. Only one hundred in existence. Just one would do.

It was a strange coincidence, I thought. *Aren't they all.* The Philatelic Bureau had been a small glass fronted office on a tiled arcade that ran through the back of the GPO, the early nineteenth-century General Post Office building, that classical centerpiece on one side of wide O'Connell Street (or, as it was known before independence, Sackville Street), its Greek hexastyle portico stepping out over the sidewalk to stand among the flowing crowd like a Colossus. That building had been seized on Easter Monday as the headquarters of the faction of the Irish Volunteers (and the Irish Citizen Army, a left-wing militia) that had decided to launch a symbolic fight for national independence despite being countermanded by the leadership of the majority. There the Proclamation of the Irish Republic was read out loud, which promised to cherish “all the children of the nation equally.” Strangely I had been making a paper diorama of O'Connell Street on and off for months before the parcel arrived. A tiny GPO rose at the center of the model, glued to its posterboard street.

The ties which bound me to my mother's homeland weakened year by year. But what is most poignant does not always come at the end. It was Midsummer's Eve and the eve of my departure for Holland. A friend who was a math teacher (we met at University College Dublin – one day, leaning against a wall waiting for a classroom to empty for Quantum Mechanics, he

struck up a conversation with me when he observed me reading Seamus Heaney's *Station Island* instead of my textbook) was heading over to a small town on the shore of the IJsselmeer to work in a tulip bulb factory for the summer. His early marriage was beginning to unravel. He was bringing his four year old son and invited me to accompany them to get me out of the rut I had fallen into since my return from London last winter and another failed beginning. It was Midsummer's eve and Ireland was playing Holland in a World Cup match in Italy. All Dublin flowed through the summer streets to watch on big screens in pubs. I went with my ex-girlfriend and some of the support staff from her solicitor's office. I was staying at her flat for the final days in Dublin. It would be one of the last few times we rolled back into each other's arms before she shook herself and moved on with her life. She was very sad and watchful that evening and I was aggressively light hearted and flirtatious. If I learned things from that first real love I had not learnt them yet. We had been together since second year in college. She had tried to hold me together when my family life disintegrated. She tried to keep me interested in my studies. She tried to pull me out of a depression. And I thought I was Jimmy Porter in *Look Back in Anger*, held back by pusillanimity and coldness.

Ireland scored, leveling the match. The pub exploded. We were all yelling at the screens when they switched to a closeup of a craggy faced commentator who'd predicted the Dutch would wipe the floor with us. I yelled and laughed with the young secretary Nicole, who was always losing buttons from her clothes (you'd go in through the frosted glass door to the solicitor's office, the bell ringing over your head as if a timer started, and she would be standing behind the counter staring down at her own small cleavage, one bare arm raised upright like the Statue of Liberty holding the stapler and then, on some secret sign, she'd swoop down and snap the gap in her dress. There was always some little drama like that happening when you caught

sight of her. She had an actor's sense of always being in the middle of what's going on. Was it just her eyes?). Pop, pop, pop went the buttons. Snap, snap, snap went the stapler. I actually thought this would be her story.

I got into making dioramas when my son was in preschool. If the show and tell project for Friday was to make a little cardboard and paper model of the Taj Mahal – because the kids were learning about India that week – then I would stay up late on Thursday night trying to figure out a better way to swell the dome and place the finial, and so express the love Shah Jahan had for his favorite wife, Mumtaz Mahal. When they were in Egypt I rendered the western desert with just the right shade of yellow construction paper and placed tiny pyramids where the river bends. I regret recycling that one when we moved. But I have a picture of it.

The model of Sackville Street was to be a visual poem in memory of Nicole. Elegies made out of words I've written for her seem inadequate. Leukemia tore through her blood and she died the following year on the day before her twentieth birthday, September 5<sup>th</sup>. I turned her into my Beatrice. I would tell the sad story about the pretty kind young woman who died. I would quote from her affectionate letters, kept from that summer sitting outside my tent in a field in North Holland. I became the tragic figure of the poet in exile remembering the young woman surrounded by her admirers, as Dante leaned against a pillar and felt old.

I prefer to think of that Midsummer's Eve, the drunken crowds pouring out into the yelling streets, me running down the median of the thoroughfare, cars blaring their horns on either side, from the gold letters of Parnell's pyramid at the north end ("We have never sought to set the *ne plus ultra* to the progress of Ireland's nationhood and we never shall"), past the faded

grandeur of the Gresham Hotel, Nicole running to catch up with me, the others falling far behind, past the long body of Anna Livia in her fountain like a shallow grave (since removed), the bronze spirit of the Liffey (Anna Livia Plurabelle, James Joyce called her), past the serendipity of Clerys department store (I used sticks of chalk to model the pilasters on its grand façade – I am always overwhelmed by the Baroque excess of old fashioned department stores, except for one department: the perfume area, always on the ground floor when you enter, you don't know if this is the threshold to the underworld or an escalator to paradise, either way you surrender your body to the senses), Nicole having now caught up with me and matching my stride which I slowed down to keep beside her, I grabbed her hand and we ran shrieking around the wide base of Nelson's Pillar even though it had been blown up in 1966 by some Republicans on the fiftieth anniversary of the Rising, but this is the realm of memory now where objects can be exchanged for one another if the emotion is kept true (I used the cardboard roller from a roll of paper towels to resurrect it, built in 1809 to commemorate Horatio Nelson's victory at the Battle of Trafalgar, decades before the famous column was built in London), we looked up and saw the missiles fired from the British ships in the river hurtling towards us and the GPO, but they passed right through our bodies without harm.

Coming up to the bridge I dropped her hand and sprinted ahead with the last of my breadth and stopped and turned and opened my arms, like Aeneas full of yearning in Hell, and she jumped up and hit my body and we spun clasping and fell on the pavement laughing like idiots. All this happened.

Did we kiss? In the movie version, sure. But her boyfriend came running up just then and helped her stand and the evening passes out of memory.

That was my Beatrician vision. I invoked it often to comfort me, especially when I felt alone. I think now it was an obfuscation. A simpler narrative hiding one that's more complex. I was literally running from the truth down that thoroughfare of my youth. And it was glorious.

## 89 Lower Leeson Street

“I suppose none of this makes sense to you, Charles, poor agnostic. I stayed there till he was gone, and then, suddenly, there wasn’t any chapel any more, just an oddly decorated room.”

- Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited*

The last time I visited the city I grew up in was eight years ago, before I had children.

One afternoon, walking around the center, I turned off the street and climbed some granite steps to enter a short blue corridor, which passed right through a Georgian<sup>1</sup> building, and emerged in the yard of my High School. Or maybe this was eleven years ago, on our previous visit? Or thirteen years ago, that really happy summer, when Mollie had that study abroad month during Law School at Trinity College, and I joined her for two whole weeks? After more than twenty years in the States, my occasional visits home have begun to fade and confuse, like when you press a spectacular flower you plucked one afternoon, in the cream pages of a heavy book, but

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<sup>1</sup> I rarely entered the main front Georgian building all the years I went there. The first time I went into the priests’ house as we called it was at the age of seven, accompanied by my mother on one of her visits from London, for an admission interview. She had admired the uniforms of boys from the school when she saw them in the streets of Dublin as a girl, and she determined if she ever had a boy she would send him there. Her parents, my grandparents, who were raising me, though it was an affectation, and an extravagance to send *the boy*, as I was known, to a fee-paying school when there were perfectly good free public schools to go to, that all my cousins attended. But it was her money and her determination and they went along. We sat in the front parlor and chatted with Father O’Herlihy, a stern basalt rock of a man, who was the principle of the elementary school at that time, but would rise to principle of the High School by the time I graduated there and so seemed to follow me. In the years to come I would experience corporal punishment from him until I learned to control myself – strokes or belts of the *leather* on my outraged hands. It was a reinforced thick tongue of leather used as a beating implement. A sort of pedagogic truncheon. It was meted out in the privacy of his office. No public executions in our civilized time. I would also have him for one year as my English teacher towards the end of High School. He took a dry didactic approach to literature. It was wasted on him. I could swear he sympathized with Gradgrind’s perspective in Dickens’ “Hard Times”! And then in the last weeks before final graduation I had the long delayed pleasure of firing eggs at him in a surprise attack from the roof of the art building and getting temporarily expelled – just until the start of the final examinations, along with most of my class. This was an annual tradition for the Senior class, but I’m sad to say the tradition was quashed after our time.

forgot to scribble the date and location and what-you-were-thinking-of, and then it slips out and falls to the floor years later, when you're looking for some reference, and you pick it up and marvel at its rigid flatness, but the faded color is disappointing, and it brings nothing back, and you throw it in the trash. Mollie stood beside me in the yard. You may fill in the blue sky with the fast-moving small ruffed Irish clouds. I certainly remember she wore that straight down buttery colored Coach rain coat, with the little collar. It had cost so much one of our first Christmases together, but I had convinced her it was right to celebrate, and to sometimes get what you desired. You would keep it a long time, whereas something more practical would be abandoned the very next season. And indeed she still wears it occasionally.

We stood in the yard surveying the buildings which surrounded it, and I remember thinking, *this was my whole world from age seven to eighteen*. This hidden enclosure schooled me, far away even from the wider world of just Dublin City with its three rivers and two canals, its bay, its bare hills, its girls with faces the color of blanched almonds, and its Viking bones. I had been like a young novice monk here, a *śrāmaṇera* as the Buddhists call them. A boy passing through the alien city each day, I was, from the house of his grandparents to this fortress of the mind. Two centuries of different styles of architecture jumbled around the tarmacadamed open space. Straight ahead was the soaring Dutch-bond brickwork of the nineteenth century upper form building, with the beautiful tall narrow windows. The Latin teacher had once kicked a boy in one of my classrooms there for not knowing how to conjugate a verb. Fergus was the boy's name. He had one of those haircuts that looked like his mother put a bowl over his head and cut around the edge, taking it off to reveal a neat little haystack. I always liked his cheekbones. Why do I remember his cheekbones? They looked like the bumps a child's feet make in the smooth flatness at the end of their bedspread. He had a winning smile, but he was a smart aleck. He

probably said something to set the Latin master off. It was a furious scene, this grown man, wearing a shirt and tie and a suit, a weak atmosphere of chalk dust clinging about him, suddenly rushing towards the little boy and hurting him with the hatchet chop of his narrow shoe, with the shiny under sole. Fergus ran out the door and he chased him down the corridor trying to kick him, or smack him around his head repeatedly. We all just sat there in our little wood and metal desks, with the empty holes, where a previous generation of schoolboys would have had little brass inkwells installed to dip their fountain pens in and write *ad nauseam*:

amo *I love*

amas *You love*

amat *He/She/It loves*

We climbed the echoing staircases of the building as I told the story. On the wall of one corridor we came across the framed snapshots of my class in Senior year. We all looked like *children* is what I thought, so young still. My hair was thick and wavy with its mass, like a black *blancmange*. We went into the classroom where I thought the assault had taken place. Why do objects look so dingy when you pull them out of the past? Scratched and dinged and dull. The classroom said nothing. I went over to the window and leaned on the massive old radiator, turned off now in summer, but I had a visceral memory of the kettle boiling heat of those radiators in the winters there. How the huge panes of glass would frost up with condensation. We would write obscenities in the vapor between classes, waiting for the next teacher, and then hurriedly rub them out with a squeal and a squeak of the fist.

Looking out over the campus I was impressed with the new art building, and the totally rebuilt science lab.

“We used to go to art class in a prefab down there”



I was holding Mollie's hand. How could I possibly remember if I was holding her hand in that classroom that afternoon, when I don't know for sure which of the years these memories happened without digging up albums and letters and e-mails? Because I was often holding her hands in those days. It reassured me, or thrilled me to walk down the street or stand holding her hand. She would complain because her palms would sweat. I found that attractive.

"I always painted the same thing in art class. I'd cover the sheet in black and then dip a brush in yellow or red or white and flick it at the black field to make stars. Mr. Hackett didn't approve but he would give me a pity mark. I did envy his encouraging discussions with the people who could really draw. For a long time I had this daydream I was going to painstakingly learn to draw a bird really well, you know just a thrush or a sparrow or a red breast or something, and amaze him. He's dead now."

A lot of them are dead. Plump Father Russell is gone, who was a good storyteller. When we were younger and would get boisterous in class (over in the old French room wasn't it?) he'd grab your cheek between his fat fingers and squeeze. It really hurt. He called that *giving you a lollipop*. No one wanted one of Russell's lollipops. I remember the last time I met him. It was a few years after graduation, when things had fallen apart. Gran and Pop were dead. I cut off contact with any of the wider family even though it had only been Uncle Paul I quarreled with the day of Gran's funeral, over in Auntie Carmel's kitchen, yelled at each other for an hour when he came over to tell me the details of Pop's will and how my mother was cut out of it. I'd dropped out of college. I was dragging down the relationship with Mary. She tried and tried to hold me up and I just hurt her over and over. I'd go away, hitch to Berlin or somewhere and then come crawling back into her narrow bed a few weeks later, throwing her life back into uncertainty. How many times I did that. Why she didn't just tell me to fuck off? Anyway, it was

an evening and Mary and I were walking through Stephen's Green just down the street from the school and I spotted Russell and immediately and instinctively moved in the opposite direction, pulling Mary<sup>2</sup> along with me but Russell had spotted me too and called out and hurried to catch up with us. It was like he could read everything that was going wrong with my life in an instant. He spoke warmly to both of us and made me promise to come visit him at the school and stay in touch. I never did and I always felt bad about that. Now that I'm older I can see how it is that you can look into a person's whole life in an instant.

“And Paul Ryan, he's dead too”

We were walking back across the yard now, intending to leave. There are only so many memories you can go through in an afternoon before a theme emerges. Paul Ryan taught French and Drama. He was a successful playwright. Several of his works were performed at the Abbey Theater and some of his work appeared on television. But we loved to say nasty things about him in the schoolyard because we suspected he was gay. It's hard seeing that lack of reflection, that lack of sensitivity in me, in earlier me, out in the schoolyard throng. I didn't even like the people I was joining in with to bash someone behind their back. What's crazy is I was a sensitive child who should have appreciated someone like Ryan much more. But I jeered with the rest. I won't make excuses about culture. But poison leaks in all right. Some other time, I was sitting at the kitchen table in the house of a friend's parents. His mother had just cut a slice of Battenberg cake for me. She's a wonderful woman. But when the subject of Ryan came up she spoke with intense bitterness, as if the calumnies from all those years ago which had equated gayness with child

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<sup>2</sup> Mary was a small woman with soft brown hair and brown eyes and hands as small as the ones mentioned in that e.e. cummings' poem, you know the one where he talks about nothing having such small hands – not even the rain. Woody Allen let Michael Caine woo Barbara Hershey with that poem in “Hannah and Her Sisters” – you remember it now? Anyway, Mary had small hands.

molestation were in fact true. Her bitterness<sup>3</sup> was not one whit abated by the fact that Ryan had died from HIV/AIDS, his promising career cut short. She poured me tea.

Over to the side of the yard was the church<sup>4</sup>. I had to go have a look at the interior. I had been a lay reader when I was a rather shy teenager, and it had given me confidence. There is nothing like a stirring piece of Isaiah or one of St. Paul's letters to make you feel like you have some powder in your keg. Mollie didn't want to go in. Churches<sup>5</sup> weren't her thing. She dropped her tiny Italian rucksack-style bag on the ground and leaned back against a whitewashed wall, raising one knee prow-like, so that the sole of her tennis shoe was placed on the whitewash also. Then she turned her face up to the sun with her eyes closed behind her large dark sunglasses, as a boisterous stream of boys in uniform flowed past her on the way to some class, their grey shirts untucked, and the noose of the striped school ties unloosed, just as in my day. Although, it was

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<sup>3</sup> Ugh. This is all so arcane, so insufferable. I feel like I'm describing the dietary and mating habits on another planet. But if this was a novel you would perhaps be willing to learn a lot of this local accretion. For this was a part of the background noise of my childhood. There was a time I couldn't see outside of any of this.

<sup>4</sup> My private Catholic school was run by the Marist Fathers, originally a French Catholic order, devoted to Mary, the Mother of God – hence *Marist* – and heavily involved in the education of young men (for it was an all boys school, with an elementary school attached) who would rise to be part of the elite echelon in their society – in politics, the professions, business. Our particular Marist school in the center of Dublin had been founded in the nineteenth century specifically to be a preparatory school for the newly established Catholic University (legal discrimination against Roman Catholics in British public life having only recently been lifted) which John Henry Newman had been instrumental in launching. Yes, that John Henry Newman. The English cleric, part of the Oxford Movement of the 1830s, which reveled in the High Church traditions, who led many influential Anglicans to convert to Roman Catholicism – a major and surprisingly retrograde shift in English taste when you consider the history of the wars of religion. Who rose to be a cardinal, pulling strings in the Vatican, and, incidentally one of the great essayists of his era. “The Idea of a University” (1852, 1858), and his “Apologia Pro Vita Sua” (A Defense of His Life, 1864) being two especially titanic works. At C.U.S. (Catholic University School), for that was the name of my school, we felt that Newman belonged to us, that we were a part of this grand history.

<sup>5</sup> I hadn't been a Roman Catholic since I left C.U.S., since my grandmother died in fact. But I always loved the interiors of churches wherever I went, even in my most militant atheism. Those great listening stations oriented toward the stars, of another age.

never something I did, truth be told. I was far too uptight and a rule follower. My grandmother would never have stood for it. I looked at my girl with yearning before ducking into the dark interior of the church. I was always looking at her with yearning. The weeks she'd been here before I arrived had only increased my desire to do so. Sometimes it annoyed her, how I gazed and fawned on her. I was in the puppy stage of love. Actually it often got on her nerves I remember. I was really pleased she was here with me, in this place where I'd been lonely<sup>6</sup>. Now I was proud.

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<sup>6</sup> The one period I remember not feeling lonely at school was the summer between junior and senior year. Of course just about everybody was gone! All except me and my friend Michael, who got sweet summer jobs doing repairs and cleaning and odd bits and pieces around the school buildings and grounds. Some of the older priests who didn't travel for the summer were around but largely unseen up in the big house. And there was Linda Duffy.

Michael and I were sixteen that summer and Linda was twenty one and worked in the kitchen. She cooked the meals for the priests since of course they didn't have any women of their own. She told us stories about a couple of the old celibacy-addled priests touching her as she passed them holding heavy trays, and one who, she claimed, chased her round and round the chopping block in the kitchen one day until she threw her apron over his head and escaped. I was humorlessly outraged on her behalf. How dare these eunuchs pant after this young woman. That was our job!

Michael and I engaged in quite a rivalry that summer for Linda's affections. She seemed to appreciate the attention. It was a bit lonely for her, a working class girl with high spirits, living in that gloomy monastic setting. She seemed so much older than us, and mature. But of course that was only because we were so inexperienced. What balanced things out and gave us confidence was the fact that both of us had shot up with a late growth spurt in the last year, whereas Linda was short and *petite*, though that wasn't a word I would have even known back then.

It's fair to say I was fixated on her breasts. Does any sixteen year old attracted to women need to finesse that sentiment? Oh the hours I spent daydreaming about Linda Duffy's nipples and her areolae (though I really wasn't sure how to pronounce those). Lying on my bed back home late into the evening, when the twilight refuses to fade at that latitude, surely I pledged myself to my lady as true as any knight. But before you dismiss my suit and my ardor you should know that I pored over the details in my mind of the curve of her calf muscles also, and the way her socks emerged from her sneakers, and the sound of her laugh. The sound of her laughter.

"Will you help me do my exercises?" she asked.

"Certainly. What do you need me to do?"

"I want you to hold my ankles down as I do my sit ups."

This was in the tiny gym we had then, really just a narrow room with weights and mats off the store room for the school tuck shop. The windows were all high up so you couldn't look

I pulled open the heavy swinging door.

“Sir! You can’t go in there!”

I entered the narthex. It was a lot lighter than I remembered.

“Sir! Where are you going? Sir!”

It was really annoying, that shouting behind me, outside. It almost felt like they were shouting at me. I began to feel anxious, I hurried through the inner doors. The shouting voice felt like it was running to catch up with me, entering the church. I did not look back. I had this momentary fantasy that the past was catching up with me. [Like in that Ukrainian folk tale Gogol makes use of in one of his stories. If you do not look into the eyes of the phantom it cannot harm you.]

“Sir!”

My god. I was inside the sanctuary and it blazed with light, but it was the light of the street, of the city, of the real world. It was a Protestant light. Where were the stained glass windows? Where were the pews? Where was the low brass and marble wall separating the altar from the congregation? Where was the altar? Where were the old women with head scarfs, kneeling with their rosary beads, who had been there every day of my childhood, and every day for a hundred years? Anonymous women from the city, they were, who entered through the blue corridor from the street, to keep the candles burning eternally for the Roman Empire. There was

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into this space from the outside. Michael had gone home for the day. I was late and would be in trouble once I got home for not letting them know. This is what’s called *second base*, though obviously I didn’t call it that back then.

When school started back up in the autumn, there was a hint of tragedy in the air. One of the priests almost caught us kissing and fondling among the ladles and saucepans. I demonstrated my prowess at present buying by presenting her with an edition of Freud’s “Interpretation of Dreams” after she told me one of her dreams and asked me what I thought it meant. Maybe I should have read the book before I gave it to her. A few weeks later she was gone. I don’t know why. But I know I did not feel lonely that summer.

no cross, no Virgin, no crown of thorns. Only a dingy basketball hoop<sup>7</sup> mounted where the stanced bleeding body of Christ had once hung. A hand reached for my shoulder from behind.

“Sir, you can’t be in here.”

I turned around and faced a teacher, an earnest young man. He seemed to think I had trespassed into some private space. He explained this was the school gymnasium.

“But it was the church,” I insisted, bereft.

He stopped, and smiled. It hadn’t been a church in fifteen years, he said. They didn’t have enough space, and there weren’t that many members of the public who came to the services anymore anyway. They really needed a gym. They had a prayer room set up in the front building<sup>8</sup> that people could visit for silent contemplation. He could show me. He stared at me. Recognition dawned.

“I know you,” he said. “You were two years ahead of me in school. Jonathan right?”

“Yes!”

We shook hands. I did not remember him at all, but he let me off the hook. He spoke enthusiastically about my activities in school: the chess club, the philately club, my triumphs representing the school in public debating competitions and history quizzes. We can see a pattern here now.

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<sup>7</sup> I thought of that “Planet of the Apes” story where a church in the post-apocalyptic future has a hydrogen bomb hanging where the cross used to be, and the congregation worships the bomb. And in the end the bomb drops and wipes out everything.

<sup>8</sup> The front building dated from the eighteenth century, as did the whole continuous terrace all the way from Stephen’s Green up to the hump bridge over the Grand Canal. The blue reflective corridor passed right through that front building, so that you could reach the school grounds without truly *entering* the main house. The priests of the order lived there. Or they used to. The number of priest teachers on the faculty had declined to just two. In many ways, the school was just a Catholic school in name only at this stage.

Other staff approached, having picked up that an old boy was visiting. Mr. Jennings, who had been my history teacher, and taught me a great deal about writing essays<sup>9</sup>, and using fountain pens, and not just agreeing with the prejudices of your own tribe came forward and shook hands. He was now the assistant principle. They still had a priest as the principle, but it was only a matter of time before a lay person succeeded to that position also. I gushed about Mr. Jennings to Mollie, right in front of him. He was bemused as he shook her hand, charmed by the pretty American blonde. It was clear he didn't remember me at all! In a flash I could appreciate that. I had been a painfully shy, inward-turned teenager. Mr. Jennings was crazy about rugby and helped coach the school teams. I had always detested the sport and any of the obligatory sports and physical activities on the curriculum. I was the sort of weedy kid a Mr. Jennings would despise on the playing field no matter how much I excelled in subtle discussion of the French Revolution in class. I always held myself apart from these Irish boys, never felt completely one of them. But it was strange and interesting to be remembered so well by someone I did not remember, and to be completely forgotten by someone who was my idol.

We left through the blue corridor, and came out once more into the street. I'm leaving out the part where the young teacher led us through the concealed door in the blue corridor up into the priests' house to see the room they had restored for contemplative visits. It was decorated in

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<sup>9</sup> He was the first to explain the dialectical process to us. He used to say there were only two worldviews worth holding – either the Christian worldview or the Marxist. That seems quaint and provincial in its own way now but it was hugely liberating to hear such alternatives mooted, especially in our Catholic boyhood classrooms, with many many cassocked priests hovering in the corridors outside back then.

The startling change was in his appearance. Now he looked like any well dressed contemporary professional man in a suit. But in my youth he retained his own youthful resistance despite being a grown up. He used to wear green velvet jackets with leather arm patches. I'm not making this up. And his hair was grown out into a Hibernian-fro back then. Think the fourth *Doctor Who*, Tom Baker, without the long scarf and the jelly babies. Though in all fairness it has to be said, a green velvet jacket is more Jon Pertwee, the third doctor.

the cold classical beauty of the Regency period. Delicate swirls of plaster and blue. Elegant chairs. It was a room in which to listen to a string quartet. Could you see anything on my face if you had encountered me that day? Or later, having a drink at the Palace bar, blending into the waves of locals and tourists? Or later still walking on Sandymount Strand trying to exhaust the light? I remember flying home (for home is now elsewhere) from that trip – or perhaps it was another time – having a clear view looking straight down of the Southern tip of Greenland, on the way back from the bathroom, of the ice sheet, and the narrow fjords. Five hundred years the Vikings endured, and then they vanished.



## The Scar

I had been living with the couple in their wooden farmhouse for several weeks. Andrzej had found me staying at the lodge just before the snows came, the last hiker of the season, a boy from the West carrying his Dostoevsky with a look of fear in his smooth face. In the evenings round the kitchen table, in the sphere of light from the oil lamps, Andrzej made me recite the poems of Dylan Thomas. I did not slow down the English words so that Andrzej could follow along. I let them soar like the flights of seabirds and it pleased me to see a look of puzzlement in Andrzej's face. But in the mornings I felt awkward coming into the kitchen. The others had been up for hours. Andrzej looked up from his manuscript and his coffee in an arabesque of smoke.

“You're not dead!” exclaimed Andrzej. “Good. The ground is too hard to bury you in until spring.”

He broke into a dry coughing fit, his eyes squeezing up. His words sounded like a loud swarm of bees, heavy over a meadow in sunlight.

Monika sat at the end of the long rough cut table in the center of a great fan of papers and photographs, her red plastic reading glasses pushed up on her black hair. She slowly lifted her eyes.

“There's coffee,” she said.

“I heard the woodpecker again this morning,” I lied, as I walked over to the glowing oven, to give the impression I'd been up for a long time. I opened the squealing door of the oven and looked into the small bright picturesque hell. Individual logs were illuminated so intensely, and licked so lovingly by the flames, that they looked like still life oil paintings of themselves in thick impasto before crumbling. I liked to imagine small naked figures walking through the

flickering amber landscape of a fire, trying to remember their lives in the world above. I threw in a fresh dark log and slammed the door.

Monika jumped up from her place as if she had solved the whole long problem of her thesis and rushed over to me. I took a step back. Was she going to cause a scene in front of Andrzej? She reached past me and refilled her coffee bowl. Then she paused and poured the last of the pitch black liquid in my empty bowl. The baby reclined in her chair. Andrzej soothed her by rocking it with his calloused hand. Her squeals of delight made him laugh. His mouth opened, showing the broken blackened range of his teeth. I marveled at how a man, who had lived life so roughly and recklessly as to lose most of his teeth by thirty, could have such grace, be so attractive to women. I felt brittle and girlish next to him.

“You should put those overalls in our laundry pile. I’m going to do some washing this afternoon,” Monika said, putting her coffee bowl down. I wondered if I smelled bad to her. I had been wearing those same borrowed olive green overalls for weeks now, almost since I arrived. They had been left behind by one of their friends from Warsaw, and I was tired of wearing my tight fitting jeans. In the overalls I felt loose, free.

Whenever Monika spoke to me I always took the opportunity of looking closely at her. Her dark hair had the precision of sculpture. A single sheet of bronze hammered into a bell. A slight cleft in her chin softened the habitual abruptness of her speech.

She swooped up the baby to take her into their room for its morning nap. I looked down at the boards of the floor as she passed by. Her kneecaps, I thought. A photographer from the silver age would want to take close up pictures of their curve and smoothness, in his studio hung with African masks, their buried bone like a weathered sand dune.

The morning was bright with no wind as I crunched across the recent snow to the outhouse. I climbed the steps and the door banged behind me. There was a hole cut in the platform. The ground dropped away behind the outhouse so that there was a large cavernous space under the platform. An unimaginable mound of ordure slowly grew in the depths. Outside again, I stood listening to the morning, trying to catch the sound of the woodpecker in the woods I'd been hearing for days now. There it was. Knock-knock-knock. Silence. Knock-knock-knock. The sound of an unexpected caller, anxiously rapping on a door. It was a peculiarly human sound to emanate from the empty woods. I walked towards it. I began to run through the unmoving trees trying to apprehend the bird at its work. But each time I reached a likely spot I'd hear the knocking up ahead somewhere else. Mocking me, I thought. It was fun to stagger through the drifts of snow in the middle of winter. Everyone I knew was at the other end of the continent, living under clouds rolling in from the Atlantic, while I ran free in this wilderness. The birch trees stood up tall and slender allowing the light to fall slowly around me on the forest floor. I stopped and leaned against a patchwork bark, panting. I could not shake the peculiar impression of the knocking. I was thinking of a day in my childhood when I lay sick in bed. My grandfather was working in the back garden, mowing the lawn. And someone came knocking at the front door downstairs. I sat up in my narrow bed, my pajamas soaked with sweat. I started banging on the old sash window. One of the small panes of glass shattered and I cut my hand. I did not remember pain but rivulets of scarlet like crushed flowers on my pale skin. And the heavy scent. I stood back from the tree and spread my fingers, tilting my left hand in the light. There was the small white worm of a scar at the base of the ring finger. I wondered why my grandmother had not come to me. She was always there when I was a child. I turned back towards the farm buildings.

When I was rescued by Andrzej at the start of the winter I exulted in my daily walks about the farm. The days grew cooler and shorter. The four wheat-colored llamas no longer roamed in the big field. Andrzej had moved them into the odorous intimate barn where there was little light or space but a strong sense of animal warmth and acceptance. It was pleasant to go in there in the mornings and just stand among them for a few minutes, letting their smell and patience soak in, being jostled by their blind moored bodies. The one sheep and the lone donkey seemed thrilled to be confined for the months ahead in the company of the oriental llamas. They seemed to stand up even straighter on their stick legs.

Only the bad-tempered male was still outdoors in the far field, still tethered to his post, munching his way in great circles through the afternoons. He would suddenly stop and raise his long neck and stare darkly at the empty field where the graceful females had of late tumbled and cavorted and playfully chased one another. It had been years since he was allowed near a female, ever since he had started to bite and draw blood and bellow when he fumbled to mount one. Andrzej had a great liking for this animal. He would stand beyond the furthest orbit of the beast on its tether and grin approvingly when nostalgia and bitterness caused it to pause and look up. Somehow the rotten stumps of Andrzej's teeth echoed that grim look.

When the heavy snows came he moved him into a separate stall in the barn, walled off from the view of the other animals. There he would bump against the partition and screech through the gloomy evenings. The others huddled closer together. Outside the snow lit the floor of the earth even into the deeps of night. If you stepped outside after dark it felt like the world was illuminated from underground.

Andrzej was hauling bales of hay out of his Soviet jeep when I came up to the barn. The vehicle had been found abandoned, just like the farm, when Andrzej had moved to this border district several years ago. I found it ironic that Andrzej drove a military vehicle considering he spent a year in a Warsaw prison for evading compulsory military service. It was just as funny as the army jacket I had pulled on that morning, after I rolled up the borrowed overalls and tossed them obediently in the pile of dirty clothes on Monika's bedroom floor. The jacket had the tiny flag of West Germany stitched onto each sleeve. It was a kind of uniform then for rebellious young men like me in their twenties. You could buy the gear cheaply in an army surplus store. The West Germans were considered the one army which did not want to fight a war. I had dropped out of college after my grandmother died. I couldn't see the point anymore. I had worked in several factories in Holland and Germany and had just spent the summer working on a tulip farm on the shore of the Zuiderzee. So I had quite a bit of Western money saved up, which went a long way here in Poland. I liked to think of myself as a soldier who'd deserted during some Thirty Years' War but kept the boots and the jacket. Threw away the musket.

"I can help," I said, taking off the jacket.

Andrzej stuck a filterless cigarette between his lips and clicked his lighter. He grinned and made a little flicking gesture with the pack of cheap cigarettes so that one stuck its head up out of the pack and he pointed it at me. We stood smoking in silence. The animals stirred inside the barn.

"You go for a walk?" Andrzej asked. His English was rudimentary. I had no Polish but he did have a little German. Andrzej's only other language was Russian. When we were with Monika we could talk about things because she was a gifted linguist with four or five languages. Although there were days when she would hardly speak.

“Yes, in the lower woods,” I gestured with my hand pointing back the way I had come.

“Ah, inspiration! The Irish poet walks in the wild Polish forest. You see ghosts of armies going to Moscow?” Andrzej laughed and turned away, throwing the stump of the cigarette into the snow. He grasped another bale of hay with both hands outstretched and walked stiffly into the barn. “Come on. Show me what a good farmer you are!”

My ears burned. I was never sure when people made fun of me if they liked me or not. I felt awkward around Andrzej because we couldn't talk in detail. I didn't know what else to do except talk. I was used to showing off with what I could talk about. All the history and literature and hard science I knew. But even in the evenings when we were all together and I would talk expansively, Monika always had a slight grin on her pretty face, which threatened at any moment to turn into a sneer. She would translate for me but then she and Andrzej would talk about it in Polish and sometimes laugh. Then she would explain why they were laughing but I wasn't sure she told me the truth.

I wrapped my arms around a splintery golden bale of hay and hauled up and staggered into the barn.

It had happened in the first few days at the farm. Monika was washing the dishes from breakfast when I stooped and came in from my morning walk. She stood with her back to me in the corner, her elbows jerking up and down like the pistons of a small steam engine. I poured some coffee and went over to sit at the table where piles of papers and the opened spines of supine books were abandoned. Derrida, Foucault, Lacan. I knew better than to speak. In the mornings she seemed to resent me being there.

There was a terrible rattling and clattering in the small basin. Suddenly a knife slipped out of her soapy hand and skidded across the floor like a javelin. She went rigid, straightened her back, both hands planted in the water. She was staring at the wall, breathing heavily, waiting. I put my mug down and got up. She turned and bent down before I had taken two steps. But in her blind rush to beat me to the knife, one foot stepped on the toes of the other and twisted. She tripped over herself and fell to her knees with a scream, the palms of her outstretched hands smacking hard against the rough wood. I was frightened. The back of my neck and shoulders felt cold and moist. I pictured Andrzej charging into the house with the baby on his arm, thinking I had somehow attacked Monika. She began to cry. A slow unwinding wail. She hung her head, her face hidden by her hair spilling forward. I liked her like this, on her hands and knees, ashamed, knocked down, not fighting me as she usually did. I walked over to her and knelt down and coiled my arms tightly around her shoulders, hauling her up into a kneeling position, pressing her head against my face. She hung there, heavy and swaying, her breath warm on my face. I couldn't believe it. I squeezed her harder. I started to kiss her face, it was damp and sour. Her eyes were open.

Each morning I woke up ashamed. I lay in the warm sleeping bag on the mattress drifting in and out of sleep, wishing I could remain there all day, like an animal hibernating until the spring. They never lit fires in this wing of the cabin. So the room was bleak in the morning except under the covers. The room was separated from the kitchen, and Monika and Andrzej's room, by an open passageway which passed right through the house from front to back. In pleasant dreams women spoke kindly to me, they reached out and touched me, so softly but with such yearning, that their arms and legs passed through one another without friction, and their

ribcages meshed as easily as beams of colored lights twisting in a disco. I supposed my lonely reading of Milton had entered my unconscious, where he talks about angels passing through each other's bodies. Usually I could not identify these kind women. Or they would be girls I had never been involved with or there was no question of involvement, so it was always quite disappointing on waking to realize the dream was only a dream.

Or I would lie awake and enjoy my shame, masturbating in the sleeping bag, over and over. Sometimes I needed a picture to help me and the best one was a black and white photograph I used as a bookmark in my journal. I would reach out of the fetid bed to the little pile of books on the floor beside me and retrieve the shiny print. It was of a brown-haired severe looking girl sitting sideways in a wicker chair and badly blurred. The way she moved through space was captured in that blur.

We had started seeing each other our second year at college back in Dublin. She was from the country and very unsure about having sex too soon. But one evening we had been out drinking with friends, and then we walked back to my grandmother's house along the canal, well after midnight when she would be safely asleep in bed. The house was dark and sad when we arrived. My grandfather had died only a few months before and things were beginning to decay. I usually stayed overnight at my girlfriend's flat. We would sleep naked in each other's arms but not make love past a certain point. That evening in the darkly furnished living room, with no lights on except the red glow from the fake log fire and the heavy red floor length curtains pulled tightly and the key turned in the lock of the room, the girl lying on her back on the carpet blushing at my hopeful erection, her brown hair in disarray, reached up and pulled my dark hair down to her mouth and whispered loudly that I could go in. On the carpet lay a swollen tampon she had pulled slowly from between her legs a few minutes before. The memory was exquisite.



But my grandmother, with only a few months to live, had woken up and come downstairs and now was banging on the locked door demanding that I open it.

So each morning I woke up ashamed. I heard the murmurs of the others across the passageway in their early happiness. The baby's cooing and squeaking and crying were notes written on that high extra ladder of lines drawn only as needed above the regular stave, while Monika's comforting Middle C soothed all and Andrzej's bass notes of cigarette smoke and jazz made the whole composition come alive. I got up.

I was passing the well in the afternoon heading back to the cabin for a rest just as Monika was hauling water for the laundry. I stopped to help her. She had just filled two buckets when I came up. I hooked another dented one I found on its side in the snow to the end of the rope and winched it down into the cold water as Monika bent her knees, grasped the handles, stood and slowly walked away, her small back rigid and straight. The surfaces of the water swung wildly. It was always pleasing how heavy water was, even though you could see right through it. I hauled the brimming spilling bucket above the top of the well wall and unhooked it. There were no more buckets. Carrying the one bucket back to the cabin slowly, the muscles of my upper arm trembled. I spilled repeatedly on my army boots. Before I made it Monika was returning with two empty buckets and she passed me with a smile.

A few minutes later I returned to the well. She had her back to me, turning the winch. I came up behind her and brought the operation to a halt by taking hold of both her cold arms. She just stood there but leaned back on me for a minute. Then she let go of the winch and the wheel spun rapidly and there was a loud splash. She turned and walked off to the cabin.

I remembered my grandmother telling a story from her girlhood in the country. “There was a proud young woman from a big house,” she would say, as she peeled the long lumpy potatoes with her sleeves rolled up and a cigarette smoking itself in a glass ashtray beside her. “She thought she was better than everyone else in the area. Young men came courting her and she turned them all down. Her father had warned her about her reckless riding but she was heedless. She crossed the long field beside the ruin of the old abbey. She jumped over the well but she didn’t make it. Horse and rider all fell in.” “What happened when she hit the bottom?” “She never did, she’s still falling.” That image haunted me as a boy, the beautiful young woman in the riding habit with the crop and the hard helmet on her upbound tresses, falling through space on the saddle of her frightened horse, both of them slowly turning to skeletons and still falling. It made no sense of course, and I tried arguing with her about the finite distance to the water and the finite depth of the well and the actual diameter of the earth and all, but she with a great air of finality insisted “she’s still falling.”

Andrzej announced that evening in the lamplight that tomorrow he would make one last visit for the year to each of the churches and cemeteries he was caretaker for in the surrounding hills. A thrill went through me. A whole day with just her. That’s what I’d been waiting for. I brushed my hand over the reproduction on the page I had open before me. A Russian painter depicting the morning scene on the beach when Ulysses meets Nausicaa, the slender daughter of the local king, who takes him back to the palace to tell his story. He walks several paces behind her as she proceeds straight-backed along the edge of the foam, the whole world besides only blue sky and golden earth. But I opened my mouth and said I would like to go with Andrzej. The Austrian war cemeteries from the First World War sound fascinating I said.

In the morning I woke much earlier than usual and crossed the passageway and stooped to go into the kitchen. The original inhabitants of these valleys were small in stature, much shorter than Poles or Ukrainians. I often bumped my head passing from one room to another. I always stopped to admire the passageway. The opening straight through the cabin kept it cool in summer because of the second law of thermodynamics. Since the air temperature at either end of the passage could not statistically be identical, the heavy air of summer was forced to move from one end to the other. Monika was alone, feeding the baby. She did not speak. I joked about how early it was for me to be up. Still she did not speak but only stared at me. I remembered being sent to the headmaster's office when I was ten because the teacher had caught me drawing a jokey picture of what I supposed a naked woman looked like, using only round brackets, a double u and two full stops. I had not been more exposed then, standing rooted to the spot awaiting my punishment, than I was now with this real woman sitting silently before me, her child suckling quietly on her breast. I broke the gaze and walked over to the oven. I carved a couple of large hard slices of bread and spread some canned paste on them, something with a sweet meaty fragrance to it. I had acquired a taste for this kind of war ration Central European breakfast.

We drove to the cemetery in silence. The Austrians marched through these hills on their way to attack Russia and many of them remained, lying on their backs under the birch trees that climbed like a cathedral over their stillness. The Austrian government still paid for this forgotten resting place so far from the vanished empire. When we arrived at the gate to the cemetery we left the jeep and walked. The gate had an elaborate carved arch over it, as if you subtracted a whole church leaving only the entrance arch which somehow suggested the whole. Each mounded grave had a wooden marker erected over it, with gothic script, and an individual

miniature wooden sloped roof, so that the names would be visible even in the midst of winter snows, provided only there was the light of the moon.

“Why is it always so peaceful after a war?” I said. Andrzej lifted a branch which had fallen. Fallen and smashed one of the grave markers.

When we got back after dark Andrzej went off to the barn to check on the animals. I went into the kitchen and found it empty. The lamps were lit on the table. The door to the bedroom was ajar. I had to go in. Monika stood in the dark looking down on the baby in her crib. The back of the wood stove in the kitchen projected into the bedroom through the wall. The original inhabitants spread their bedding on top of this box of heat and slept in that cramped alcove through the white winters. Monika had told me that Andrzej had joked about doing that when they moved in. So she had clambered up on the rough platform with Andrzej one fall afternoon, giggling and shoving him into the corner and they lay down on their backs uncomfortably with their arms stiff at their sides and their eyes closed. “We were like a crusader and his gothic maid sleeping in a cathedral,” she had said, as she told me this story and I looked closely at her. She had described the dusty smell of the close air and the amber light coming through her eyelids. Their legs stuck far out over the edge, she said, even her short ones and they had laughed at the absurdity of it as they raised themselves on their elbows. I had written all this down in my journal. A life could consist of just a few such scenes.

We looked down at the baby in the shadows. It lay on its back with its two hands raised above its head, curled into soft fists. *I surrender* and *I'll fight you* rolled into one. I could see this was already Monika's daughter's personality and I smiled. Monika stepped away from the crib. Standing by the bed she reached down for the hem of her dress and pulled it up slowly over her

body until her arms were raised in the air and the white cloth was turned inside out and dragged up off her skin. She turned to me. “You are an unhappy boy, Jonathan,” she said, and I felt for the first time she was being kind to me. It seemed such a luxury in winter to stand in your bare skin in the air. Before I came to stay I had no doubt Monika would sometimes leave Andrzej’s warm side in the early morning and run through the snow to the outhouse like a Scandinavian. I thought of the air rushing around her ribs and thighs like an icy winding sheet and her feet going numb with the crunchy cold of the snow. I could imagine this. Vaulting into bed she would press her freezing small feet to Andrzej’s hairy calves and he would wake up yelling and laughing and grab her and pin her down. What a gift they had given me, allowing me to live so close for a short time.

The door to the kitchen was still cracked. A sword of light stood there. Through the crack you could see an edge of the kitchen table and some slices of familiar objects. I loved this narrowed secret view into another space. Monika was fingering the scar on her belly, not looking at me anymore. I imagined Andrzej would instinctively avoid touching it even when they made love. In daylight it must be an angry red slash. But in this semi-darkness, its healed ridge looked like a line of text tattooed there, a lament for the violent birth of Monika’s daughter. She picked up a kimono draped on a chair. The motion looked like she was pouring water over herself. She went quickly out into the kitchen and I followed.

Water was boiling in a large vat on the oven. When Andrzej came in from the barn he started filling the bathtub. Each of us in turn would take our bath in the same water. The tub was placed beside the oven outside the umbrella of light on the kitchen table so that each of us could undress in the shadows. There was no talking during this delicately communal time.

Andrzej and I sat at the table reading while Monika bathed. There was a slight flickering of the oil lamps. Monika let the silk fall to the ground. She stepped into the water, folding her body up as she sat down with a sound of small waves lapping, her knees under her chin feeling cool as they emerged from the water. She relaxed in the shadows.

I had no need to keep watching Monika. I read my book. Nothing more would happen between us. She would be a goddess and I would say my prayers to her, my face and neck coloring red like some young shepherd in the old Greek tales I was reading.

Beside me Andrzej sneered through a damp campfire of cigarette smoke as he noisily turned the pages of his manuscript, thumping each page over as if he happily stabbed it in the back. Monika had not really worked on her own research for weeks now. Instead she finished typing up the manuscript of Andrzej's first book. He had agreed to let her send it to the publisher in Warsaw after one last read through. No more edits, just the bitter pleasure of a final read through. The thing ugly and true, as he liked to say.

The three of us waited for the bus in the dusty city square. I was returning to Warsaw and would then go into the West to make some money. Monika had woken me up that morning early. She had lifted the latch and entered my bedroom in a white sheath dress. She kneeled on the floor beside me and brushed her hand across my cheek. She told me about the first time she met Andrzej. He had actually caused her to leave her husband. He had caused her to sin against everything.

The first time she saw him he was rolling around on the ground with a dog that was trying to bite him. He had his large hands around the dog's throat and his big face close to the snapping teeth. She described how he laughed while the others in her group rushed forward

yelling and screaming to chase the beast off. Afterwards he stood up, staggering, his clothes askew and muddy, blood on his chin, rummaging in his pockets for a cigarette while a wry aphorism formed on his lips in his Warsaw working-class accent.

I looked at them now from my seat at the back of the bus as it pulled out of the square. They waved for a long time.

## Discovery Path Loop Trail

*“Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved things to an unimproved end.”*

Thoreau, *Walden*

We entered the trail one June morning from West Emerson Street. At times we were above the trees looking out over Puget Sound to the Olympic Mountains. The eternal snow on the vertebrae of the ridges, in brilliant contrast to the lower less-visible slopes, renders an impression of a floating world, the promise of far-off Asia. This is different than the tree-clothed hills in the East, which suggest sleeping human bodies, not the abode of gods. Bodies you can only touch with your eyes. Different again than the bare hills in the islands across the ocean, from whence I came with my peculiar speech. Those green and brown hills which suggest the bodies of humans who dreamed the gods in their savage nakedness.

At times we were below the trees, among them, in the aisles of their cathedrals. Flashes of red and brown life in the undergrowth. Mollie wore khaki shorts and brown hiking boots and I spent as much time looking and looking at her as at any of this lively new landscape. Trying to memorize the movements of her legs through the ferns, still winter pale, a Muybridge of desire. My divorce was not yet final. I think it was another two months before the paperwork would be all signed and stamped. But on that trip to the Pacific Northwest (the Cascadia of poetry) we were already beyond the turmoil of my first marriage’s breakup and the on-again, off-again hesitancy of our courtship. I had found courage. I was frankly exulting, like some pioneer. We turned off the trail and headed down to the beach.

Whenever I am standing at the edge of water which connects out to a sea I feel that I am standing on the floor of the world and that I could possibly walk out and around the corners and



visit any part of it. The paper maps of my childhood with their aquamarine blues had so impressed me that I believed in them more, I think, than the physical wet salty traitorous seas. I believed in the possibility of mapping. Out I could walk along the estuary, by Deception Pass, and turn at the Strait of Juan de Fuca, to meet George Vancouver's ship sailing in in 1792, as he claimed this secret pocket of the continent for Britain.

That's another thing about standing on beaches with no human structures, not even roads visible (the angle of the headland hid Seattle). You can't tell what time period this is. In the present tense of writing this essay (in the morning light of the fourth floor graduate study room at Cabell Library, with the shock of pale green just flourished leaves against a backdrop of old red bricks beyond the high windows) more than a decade has passed since we loitered on that beach. The only people in that picturesque wilderness.

We're going back this summer to meet my brother-in-law and his Chinese wife's first baby, little Charlie, named for Mollie's dad. Hong's use of English is still a work in progress, the tones of her Northern dialect sometimes baffling the sense before the end of a sentence is reached. Nick's Mandarin may not be ready for delicate negotiations, but they both brilliantly speak the languages of computer coding and make jokes together the way I imagine Erasmus did, in Latin, when he visited Sir Thomas More, which so annoyed More's wife.

I have no doubt we will seek out that same beach again and it may look the same though we are older. It may look just as it did when Vancouver shouted from the gunwales of *The Discovery* to his lieutenant, Peter Puget, to man the boats and set off south to explore the Sound. Puget's family, as the name implies, were Huguenots. Religious refugees from persecution in Catholic France. I've always loved the sound of the word revocation - as in Louis XIV's *Revocation of the Edict of Nantes*. To call back. I have no doubt I will seek out that same beach

again. And may find a piece of driftwood, like I did the first time, and illegally removed from the beach and stowed in my luggage to bring back East, a smoothed piece of twisted white bark, in the shape of Australia, which stood for years on my writing desk until I hastily tossed it in the trash when we were moving and regretted, such a perfect happenstance of shape, balanced on its own sea-carved Victoria and the foot of Western Australia.

Inevitably I suppose I took an interest in astronomy. My middle name is Uranus. Not because of the Greek sky god, who has a rather dour reputation. I'm named for the first planet unknown to the ancients. A new thing in the heavens. Because William Herschel, an immigrant to England from Germany, pointed his telescope at it from his garden in Bath in the spring of 1781. He made his own telescope and his own world. My father liked that story.

There I am doing a presentation to my fifth grade class on the Apollo moon landings in the school library. I was so proud of my cardboard Saturn V rocket and the Command Module and the Lunar Module and just as I was about to explain how re-entry happened one of my smart aleck classmates shoots up his hand and asks loudly, *how did the astronauts defecate?* And I had no idea what he was talking about and stalled. Someone whispered in my ear what it meant and I went bright red through my entire skull as the class exploded with laughter and the teacher brought the presentation to an end so the Command Module was left in mid-air and failed to re-enter. I hated them all for so long.

By the time I went to college even I had acquired a certain cool affect. The *sprezzatura*, the nonchalance, the easy confidence of the young, whose minds and limbs may bend without snapping. It was my party trick in second year to explain Einstein's general theory of relativity – those bowling balls rolling on a yoga mat. Alcohol of course distorts the model, but you still get

the idea. You have to stay ahead of the game. Special Relativity was all very well and good in first year, but things move pretty fast in the currency of youth.

I see myself one morning early in London, leaving a smoke filled dank apartment, with a girl, what was her name? How could I not remember that, when I used to say it over and over, to myself, with yearning. I remember the curve of her calf muscle and where her short stature came up to on my chest to in her bare feet. I remember the keyboard of her teeth. She would nip me and laugh. It was a thing. It caused the blood to race up and down at the back of my neck. We were dumb. We were young. We were happy. For a time. I can hear her accent in the night though I can't recall her name at this keyboard. Shame. The vowels of the Kerry peninsulas. Why do I bring her in here? Because we went for a long walk on Hampstead Heath. Up to Parliament Hill where the city made of mist lay at our feet. And as we came down the meadow and ran I explained how objects bend the space around themselves and cause themselves to roll in that distorted space until they disappear down the rabbit hole. We fell in the long grass laughing and somewhere under our bodies we could hear rivulets of water running. It was one of those mornings you remember all your life.

Then the wheels came off and I dropped out. Friends were graduating, entering the professions, pairing off, buying things, travelling in different modes than me, who continued to hitchhike around the continent, as if college summers had never ended. When I came back to Dublin I'd meet up for drinks and spin tales of my terrified adventures. I'd talk about things I had read, to try to sound more serious, more intellectually dedicated, than my successful former companions.

Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* was a good show off number. It was a best seller. Everyone was buying it. Few were reading it all the way through. Although the

mathematics was not difficult, most professed to skipping those parts, like the poems in *Doctor Zhivago*. Everyone raved about this theoretical physicist whose voice they could not even hear. Whose face no longer registered the emotions.

This was a perfect foil for me in my wounded state. Over a pint of Guinness in a wood lined pub, surrounded by smoke, blowing smoke myself, I held court with solicitors and barristers, with doctors and nurses. I explained the blackbody radiation phenomenon, now known as Hawking radiation. How, spontaneously, a pair of particles comes into existence at the border of a black hole. They are matter and anti-matter. Thing One and Thing Two. *Wait, what do you mean they just came into existence, are you reverting to a supernatural cosmology?* Bear with me. Nothing has been added to the universe, since they cancel each other out. There is no hidden hand here, only the peculiarities of quantum mechanics. Picture really small mechanics tinkering with your atom and presenting you with a massive bill. *Another round!* Now, the gravitational force at the edge of the black hole, the event horizon you all know about from plenty of bad movies, is irresistible. Thing Two falls in. Thing One escapes. Remember Thing Two is anti-matter. He's a debit. The black hole shrinks a little. Thing One is matter. You see him in the form of radiation, *which appears to leave the black hole, we get it!* Quantum effects. If the pair had come into existence at any other point in space there would not have ensued this drama of the evaporating black hole. They weren't laughing at me anymore. Now they pitied me. It was time to leave.

When my father died two years ago I took my whole family to England for the funeral. This was more difficult than it sounds. He had not been involved in my upbringing. I hadn't seen him past the age of twelve. *Blah-blah-blah*, as my six-year-old comedian son would say. Then a

couple of years back, doing genealogical research on the British and colonial Indian side of my family to share one day with my own small children, I stumbled into contact with my father, unbelievably still alive but in poor health in Kent, married to his last wife, a diminutive Chinese Malay woman with much more commonsense and decency than he ever possessed, and with two final children in their late twenties, who actually had been raised (by their mother really) in the same house with him, rather than scattered along the road of youth like the rest of his profligate progeny.

Our reunion was not easy. About the best moment we achieved was one afternoon outside on a farm in Shenandoah, when he came to visit with his wife and we went away for a few days to the most beautiful part of my adopted State, sitting in the shade of a pear tree playing chess, as he had taught me to, when he would visit sporadically in childhood. I was not losing this time. We played slowly, drinking, the sun going down softly into the fallible hills and we did not finish the game before dinner. I have the incomplete notation in my notebook. I'm not sure how it would have ended.

He had a narcissistic personality, which I like to think has been fading generation by generation down our line since my grandfather Joseph worked for the railways, which stitched the subcontinent together. My father took no responsibility for the past. He was unrealistic about the present tense right in front of him. He had no interest in being a grandfather to my kids. It was like abandonment all over again. This was humiliating for a grown man to experience. I could no longer fall back on self-pity as I used to do in my youth. So, like many men, I chose scorn and anger. Pretense and rejection.

The day after the funeral, I was standing at the frosted glass door of my father's house in Tonbridge, saying goodbye to my stepmother and half-brother. I turned away towards the taxi

where Mollie and the children were already buckled in. Lay Tin called me back, ran to the study and returned with a soft red leather zipped pouch which she pressed into my hand with a prayer on her reserved face, *I hope this helps.*

A cache of photographs. My father thin in Calcutta, a boater tilted rakishly on his head, wearing a white jacket with a white girl like a spray of gardenias leaning against him almost in a swoon – were they parodying the pictures of their day? My father kicking his bicycle up on to one wheel. My father holding his bicycle up over his head to impress someone off camera. Beautiful brown faced girls in shivering white dresses and hats – were they some of my aunts? My father with a book theatrically reading – on the back mention of a Shakespeare performance. He was kicked out of so many good schools. My father on the deck of the MS Batory (a Polish cruise ship which landed Allied troops in Sicily during the war) sailing to England in the summer of 1956 (before the invasion of Suez). My father wearing fedoras in the northern rain. My father on an Irish beach with my mother's relatives – he's the only one bare chested, his unbuttoned shirt blowing in the constant breeze and there I am, a tiny boy with a stack of black hair beside my grandmother's swollen knee. The muddy colors of snapshots in kitchens, beaches, and offices through the years. Lovers, children, clients, partners in crime, who knows. So many trails to follow. I keep going back to the early purer pictures. He looks just like my half-brother Dex does now. Dex so tall and uncertain on the stairs behind his small mother as she pushed this trove into my hand.

And there was an airmail letter from 1957 shuffled in with the pictures. From my grandfather Joseph's third wife, the woman who became my father's stepmother after his own mother, Kathleen, died in childbirth. She writes about their family and friends back in Calcutta. She imagines his days in his new home in the foggy British homeland. She commends him to

various contacts in London. In between her motherly lines you can read the pain she feels that he does not write in return. He cannot be called back. Any more than her husband, Joseph could be, who ran off with the nanny. Years later she will migrate to Western Australia, like many of the children of Empire, whose places disappeared after independence. My father visited her grave once he had money. On the banks of the Swan River. The farthest place in the world. Evidence he had a heart.

## Burn Pile

Jean built the farmhouse on the ridge, or rather Jim did. It looks south toward a sleeping haunch of the Alleghanies. There are hints of narrow valleys in the distance like papers tucked into a file folder. One day you will go explore. For years she would invite us to her Halloween barn party and we made excuses. Everyone it seemed came to those shindigs from all over Hampshire County and two crooked state lines. The hippie nurse brought a splash of creativity into those conservative hills. Her boyfriend, who didn't live with Jean and her daughter, was a sculptor, one of those artists delighted the rest of us produce so much unloved junk we abandon. He could weld and rearrange the pieces we lose in our dreams. I remember especially a female figure kneeling (I must have visited his studio sometime – another barn, that protean shape, a church, an inverted ship) on the threshing floor – you could see right through her ribcage and skull - why did she seem so familiar? What did Jean's horses think of the music and lights and dancing upstairs in the upper floor of the barn which was level with the driveway coming up the curve from the winding country road – the dancers dressed as Superheroes and politician villains? That was before Facebook so I haven't even seen pictures but I feel like I was there. She's my wife's mother's uncle's oldest adopted daughter. Maybe I felt that the childhood connection would slip away as the links broke. We did go up for a birthday party for her father. Lou presided uncomfortably in his wheelchair covered by a blanket on the back patio (facing the near woods not the distant hills) as people drank and ate barbecue and listened to the drunken mandolin player, his accountant's face like a mask.

Everyone began to die or get born. The boyfriend slipped away, though Jean can still tell you the name of each county and city each of his five sons now lives in across three states. At some point when our children came along we started to visit at least once a year. It would seem



like we coming to stay for three weeks rather than the long weekend I brought in so many bags from the car. High chairs, plastic dump trucks, different degrees of resistance in pillows. I would bring one kind of bourbon and Jean would produce another. We would sit in the living room or out on the front porch, sipping and looking at the sleeping hills.

Those hills are a flank of the Alleghenies. I often think, looking at maps, we are controlled by the shapes of things. The Euclidean geometry of time! Just as the design of clothes or rooms constrain the body, architecture and streets the narrative of our days, so too the way the ridges in the landscape turn in these rural zones determines a lot. Stonewall Jackson using the Blue Ridge, like a toreador his cape, to enrage and fool his opponent. I posted a picture of those hills on Instagram and a young woman I had a crush on (it still happens from time to time, despite being older and settled and content) commented that they looked just the same as the view of the hills from Lexington, where she had gone to college (and would take Lee from the name). Two points of the same taut line on the map. Imagine if I could map all the other forces acting on her life. Including backwards through time. Would I then understand her, this younger millennial? But understanding of course is not what drives an obsession.

When Lou died Jean inherited a lot of money. She did with it what no one else would. She had her friend Jim build an indoor swimming pool wing on the back of her house. Now she can swim every day of the year. When she gets home after driving thirty miles from the hospital. When snow covers the pasture. In the dog days of summer when mosquitoes rule the land. Our kids love the pool, feeding the horses, running around with the dogs. It is a perfect simple landscape they look forward to returning to. We might as well go every week, it has become so ingrained. Swimming helps Jean's arthritis. I notice now when she hauls herself up from her corner chair to refill our glasses that she walks with a swing of one leg and looks as if she could

suddenly stumble but she lands determinedly with each step like a librarian stamping a book. It reminds me of Lou when he would struggle proudly up out of his wheelchair and walk with a crutch.

It was cold on our most recent visit. No one would join me for a tramp across the snow down to the bottom of the pasture. I wanted to see how far I could go when I hit the tree line. The snow got deeper, blown in a drift under the bare thickets. Soon I was barred by all those cold limbs. I turned back. I noticed brick fragments sticking up out of the snow. I dug down to pull up broken pieces of what I surmised was an old structure abandoned and engulfed by the woods. It was quiet, sheltered from the breeze. When I climbed back up the hill and thawed off in the living room I asked Jean what had been down in the hollow. *Just a burn pile*. Sometimes we look for a pattern in the mess.

## Vita

Jonathan Uranus Barton was born in Kensington, London, England on September 26, 1965. He was raised in Dublin, Ireland by his maternal grandparents. He attended University College Dublin where he studied mathematics and theoretical physics but dropped out before finishing his degree. He traveled in Europe before settling in the United States where he was naturalized in 2004. Upon settling in Richmond, Virginia he eventually resumed his college studies and graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2012 with a BA in English.