Outing, Such a State

Eamon Grennan
Outing

Among the mountains and woods of New Hampshire there's an ocean between us so I only imagine walking in on you asleep sitting up in an armchair the nurses have straightened, your white-haired head and the powdery skin of your face tilted sideways, your chin sinking into the sag of your breast where one button in the pale blue frock's undone.

When you fell down that Sunday last summer and your poor shoulder buckled under you, I could tell—trying to raise that terrible weight off the lavatory's slippery stone floor—the way things were. Still, as every other summer, you loved our drives out of Bloomfield to the sea, loved sitting in the car up the Vico Road and staring off over water as far as Bray Head, Greystones, the Sugarloaf—as plain on a good day, you'd say, as your hand. And no matter even if it rained, it was always a wide bright cleansing breath of open air to you, a liberation from time and place, a sort of tranquil hovering above things, with the known world close enough to touch: blackberry bushes and high-gabled houses, foxglove, long grass, bracken, the hundred steep steps down to the sea.

I wondered then if it ever crossed your mind that the next life you believed in might be something like that—the peace of simply sitting, looking at whatever was there
and passing: older couples with their dogs,
salted children streeeling from the sea, a parish priest
swinging his black umbrella, a brace of
waisted lovers in step. Over the lowered window
you’d smile your genteel “Good afternoon!”
at them all, and for this little while
you were almost out of reach of your old age,
its slumped, buzzing vacancies, its garbled talk.

But now, near another summer, they tell me
your temperature’s flaring, falling, flaring again,
and nothing to be done. Alive, but in ways
not there at all, you’ve left us and gone on
alone somewhere, and I remember us trailing
behind your solid figure as kids, you pushing
the youngest in his pram through the light
and turning to call us all to catch up, hold on
to the pram and not let go. I remember
the pounding silence when you’d hide and
we’d wait for you all of a sudden to come
dashing out behind your voice—all of you
visible, arms like wings, laughing our names out
as you came storming across the grass
and we’d turn and run, relieved to see you,
happiest in our hasting away, your good breath
bearing down.

But when I go back this summer
I’m told you won’t know me, the way you mostly
don’t know the others, and I remember the phrase
you’d use when I’d come home on holidays
after long months at school—“I wouldn’t
know you,” you’d say, holding me at arm’s length
or in a hug, “I just wouldn’t know you,” and now
the delighted words will die in your mouth
and you’ll be a pair of milk-pale hazel eyes
staring at this bearded stranger. You’ve left
already, knowing already what I’ve no words for—
the smudge and shaken blur of things, faces floating
over like clouds, sunlight swimming in a window
and falling on your lap just like that, the dark
scarf of sleep braiding day and night, the days
in their muffled procession and, bleak or sweet, the unspeakable dream-scurry, that steady slow unravelling back, the way you’d unravel an old pullover, save the good wool for darning.

Here, then, among these woods and leafy hills it’s you I think of when I watch the mountains appear and disappear in mist, the shape of things changing by the minute. And I think were you here I’d show you the blowsy irises, those exploding purple globes of rhododendron, the lady slippers in the shade, and flagrant and shortlived the blaze of the yellow day-lilies. You could listen, too, to the pure soul music the hermit thrush makes alone in the echo-chamber of the trees, his song like a blessing, you’d say, to your one good ear. Side by side we’d sit in this little screened gazebo facing Mount Monadnock and I’d tell you the mountain’s name: you’d try it a few times on your tongue, getting it wrong, wrong again, until you’d give your helpless laugh, give up and say, “Don’t annoy me now will you, whatever you call it. Can’t I say Sugarloaf, Killiney Hill, or Howth, and what’s the difference?” We’d agree on that, God knows, and you’d sit back to enjoy the view, the delicious sense of yourself just sitting—the way we’ve always done, we’re used to—pleased at how that big green hill swims in and out of view as the mist lifts and settles, and lifts, and settles.

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Sheep in their sooty masks, a cake of dried blood on every neck; the little one rubbing its mother’s woolly flank. Somewhere the vagrant cuckoo ruptures silence, then the absence of that voice fashioning silence. Ghosts of lazybeds like graves: the whole place a morgue where the young sprout hungry wings and away with them. At the corner of the high road a man is making a wall, folding stone on stone: all depend on one another, on spaces for the wind to go cleanly through. Leaf on a stream: white water behind, ahead the falls. A lark on its high wire of song: waves of light break up that little body, becoming particles of song. That was the lark you heard, and this its silence. Green shoots of bracken out of dead ground. Curlews whistling lugubrious cantatas. The music of that sudden blustering fluster the lark makes leaving its hiding-place to rise in front of you, white dabs of its tail-feathers on fire: such deaths and resurrections. And a mile down the road —where a swampy field becomes an inlet of salt, waves nibble crabgrass at every tide—you’ll find the monument to our own glorious revolution: car corpses chewed to livid bits by weather, like any other gods that have been and gone, a live red sheen of rust in silence browsing what’s left of them, being benevolently dispersed, distributed, nourishing something out of sight. It is what is the matter with us. Even the cat has to laugh. And what author of bones will proceed through such dead ends? Gathering his wits, her music? But shut your eyes and listen: the isle is full of noises: they come on wings extended, flapping like bats, their cracked heads bald, blank eyes, gumfuls of broken teeth.