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Outing, Such a State

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Two Poems

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 streeling 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.

13/VI/90

Such a State

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.