

Fanny Hare

INCUBUS OF THE FORLORN

Thomas Hardy, who might be called "an incubus of the forlorn" after one of his own characters, and for whom the past is an obscure and heavy presence that folds each person into a path determined by probabilities and failures, suffered from his memories.

He might have wanted to purge them when he sat down to write. But he wrote, as all novelists do, backwards, in the body of a character entering the story with as much uncertainty as its author, and as if he had never been anywhere before.

He called his novels "imperfect little dramas of country life and passions." In them, he said he endeavored "to give shape and coherence to a series of seemings, or personal impressions." The word "seemings" rings a bell.

Seeming is a word applied to chance—What seems to be a chance occasion is an event that is only partially traceable through a larger evaporating scheme.

A chance meeting is a meeting that seems to exist with a great probability of *not* meeting circling around it.

As we all know, almost everything *doesn't* happen.

So the chance occurrence must actually be everything that does happen.

Hardy wrote about people failing to meet as if these failures are scandalous occasions. What didn't happen astounded him.

For some reason he wanted to know why two paths coming out of elsewhere and which converged still failed two people planning to meet there at a specific time.

Convergence—an appointment kept by two—for Hardy is the existential linchpin of his quest.

How can it happen and how can it not happen? If a person has said he will be in a certain place, shouldn't his body be as good as his word?

The fact is, once two have met, their meeting can never be erased from history.

The meeting may be minor, or major, in the emotional lives involved; but it has made an ineradicable place for itself in time.

[The dread of an un-event, unwritten in time, haunted Hardy. It was a contradiction that held him inside literature—writing and history versus the unwritten in empty time. These became his subjects as much as his method.

Plot, which is twisted around the might-have-been and the how-it-was in equal measures, is any novelist's obsession.

But Hardy was rarely concerned with possibilities, which

suggest a range of potential changes in fortune spread out within reach. He saw his characters as socially limited and doomed to suffer from one disappointment after another and he made it clear that people were passive in relation to history; that historical forces acted upon individual temperaments like hands on wet clay.

It was as if he were saying, too, that a writer is molded by the imaginary or that characters are the little people of literature, midgets or slaves in the circus of the author's mind.

(Sometimes I think prostitution and slavery may be the actual subjects of all fiction because of the way fiction exploits its characters.)

Without the humiliation of social conventions in any written story, there is only a protection and reification of them by the plot.

Hardy circled around the effects of convention on people again and again; *Jude the Obscure* is Hardy's final revolution and it is relentlessly tragic.

(Convention, being structural, weirdly joins the unconscious in its control over the human impulses. Barely acknowledged, convention makes even love-talk a defense of its governance.)

While Hardy's stories became increasingly anguished in tone, he did not escape the tradition of his approach to narrative until he renounced the form entirely.

He referred to a plot as a scheme and charted detailed outlines before he began to write. As if he wanted to beat chance and to know exactly how everyone got where they were going.

Nonetheless, he said that the characters wrote the stories, and until they took over, he was uncomfortable with the work. Their blindness became his seeing, though they remained blind.

A path is like a plot—once formed, it seems to welcome and pull you into it. A path, while it is being made, offers itself, and obstacles too.

The path of entry into a novel is tangled but irresistible; it contains itself within an ever-diminishing scheme of probabilities and projections.

Is a moment predetermined or is it the result of a series of mental miscalculations?

The difficulty of decision-making hangs in this question, and plagues the storyteller.

Usually plot is to fiction what form is to poetry. It lifts and fills the rambling language and presses it down into a single shape and sound.

Poetry can be chance-generated, but fiction is always chance-generated although in an uncanny and dimly perceived way.

Characters often enter as ideas and exit as corpses.

Hardy's novels were like short stories in that they dealt with the lonely, unnoticed people in small villages around Dorset. He bore down on economics and psychology just as critically as Henry James did, but nature was his furniture and his art; it protected or exalted what was awful in the human.

Hardy lived in the years when land was becoming *landscape*.

Forest, field, orchard, and small town life were rearranged in order to serve the economic needs of a few. That is, a landed bourgeoisie with ingratiating obedience to the aristocracies. These activities systematically ravaged the natural world where he grew up.

The nineteenth century landscape painting showed an England entirely tamed by its use-value.

The framed object (landscape) would soon become the film frame.

There are—in some of Thomas Hardy's novels—the signs of his poems coming, and of the necessity for film to be born as a great art form.

Hardy's exact descriptions of the natural world around Wessex where he grew up are devoted to storing up images of the wilderness before it is too late. His language speaks for the trees, apples, water, birds, hills; he writes what it is to be without a human anywhere around.

He was one of the last great describers, an occupation that film would soon take over. Like Gerard Manley Hopkins, he labored to make no distinction between words and natural things as sensual realities.

(At times his concern with specific angles of vision is a technique that also prefigures film.)

But primarily it is in the intensity of his depictions of the wild land around Wessex that his work becomes a forerunner to film.

In a sense the silence that film scores with music is the same white page that Hardy entered with words.

When a person, for the first time, picks up a movie camera and lets it roll over the surfaces, he or she confronts the intractable silence of the mouthless living. How can you make the hills talk back? What can you do with the opacity of a filmed image?

Because words can't be there, engorging the visible with meaning, music is often introduced instead of a new literature of image.

Hardy, who declared that he was "consigned to infelicity"—who could not make himself believe in or speak of God—stood with a notebook in the center of the natural world and described it as something that experienced itself as receding, calling, maintaining, shining. A place without a person. He saw the world the way we hope that the most attentive cameraperson will see, because then no speech or music will be necessary.

Why am I thinking of Hardy?

His men are my women, for one thing. In my novels, that is. His young male characters are bewildered and penniless, ethical and destroyed.

So in this sense, he is one of the last of the most recent novelists whose work I read as if they were written for me and my characters.

His absorption in the weathers of each day, the shapes of leaves and hills, their emotional contours, reflect some similar (New England) template buried in my brain.

Beyond that, I am at the end of a generation that began with existentialism; that still prefers irritation to irony; and that shares a political position sickened by the fatal incompatibilities between freedom and equality.

(Some of us still use old words like hope, luck, labor, and timing. We are unreconstructed but adaptable.)

We are not by any means done with the existentialism of Camus and Sartre, and we don't see the history of culture in blocks—as modernist one minute and postmodern the next—but as a long struggle without interruption.

The thinking of the fifties and sixties closed down like an old department store, abruptly and inexplicably, to make room for European cultural theory that entered with shiploads of prosperity and gloss.

But the same historical activity continued, following a centuries-old set of truths: absolute power corrupts and involuntary poverty corrupts if it can.

To return to Thomas Hardy is to glimpse a phantom prophet of the coming war-world that I grew up in.

The tenacious thrust of his novels, which one after another nailed down free-spirited characters onto the fates of their social

bodies, still explains why the words "struggle" and "injustice" are knotted into economics.

His books show the close histories of laboring and uprooted people and support the resolutions of Marx and Engels.

[Still, there is another reason why I love Thomas Hardy: because he finds no happiness in memory.

He can't execute a full-turn towards the past but is caught in one magnetic moment in time, where the eyes salt over, where what is lost is not yet radiant—not a joy but a source of deepest melancholy.

He writes as if he were ploughing a path from the wall to the gate. The future is always behind him.

Usually in his novels an idealistic laborer enters a village, perplexed and vulnerable, and develops intense desires that are invariably detoured by disappointment, missed appointments, and worldly incompetence. Sometimes there is a young woman who plays this role, and there is only one person weaker and more doomed than she, and that is her baby.

A common beginning goes like this: "One evening of late summer, before the present century had reached its thirtieth year, a young man and woman, the latter carrying a child, were approaching the large village of Weydon-Priors in Upper Wessex on foot."

Always the story seems to begin at the edge of a village, with someone either coming or going. There are, however, no mar-

gins or borders in Hardy's imagination, just as there are no "marginalized" people.

The life in the village is sufficient and central to itself.

And that center is everywhere the character is—rambler, worker, woman, landowner, snob.

Hardy always prefers one or two characters to the others, but he is fair to them all, which creates complications for the plot.

This sometimes results in one character peeking at another. Not on purpose, but because of timing, an accidental glimpse that turns into a prolonged pause. Peeking lets Hardy be in two places at once, and dispenses more innocence on people than they would otherwise be able to demonstrate. Peeking is like watching someone sleep. It is also like looking back in time and watching a movie.

The character with whom Hardy generally identifies the most is someone who enters his story uncorrupted. This character is subjected to experience—experience being anything that occurs as an outcome of necessity. Experience is necessity. For Hardy, the rest is calculation and malign excess.

He doesn't like the middle men or women, that great spread of settled society that sends out representatives to exploit the unsettled ones, because they are oblivious of the effects of their actions and of the reality of the people they are affecting.

In his novel *The Woodlanders* the thickening of a middle-class presence in a rural woodland village leads to a series of weak knocks, overhearings, misunderstandings, and bad timing.

The middle people err in relation to their interest in profit. They calculate their future on the basis of their own early experience with financial difficulty. This rules them, allows them to sell their own children in the name of security.

The unstable and uprooted people err in relation to their self-doubt and lowered sense of self-worth. A chain of disappointments has given them little reason to hope for success.

Probability is said to be expectation founded upon partial knowledge. It is determined by the frequency of an event occurring sequentially. Probability goes in both directions—towards past and future.

For example, I will probably make it from here to the door because I have done so before.

Probability becomes increasingly complex with the introduction of other people's feelings, sex, broken hearts, empathy, someone's unpredictability, and the development of mistrust.

If you had full knowledge, there would be no more probability, and you would see only a dull fractal consistency to the shapes of things and their paths.

But as it is, many people either foresee nothing but trouble ahead ("Danger—Heartbreak Ahead") or they refuse to see any trouble at all in case it will paralyze them.

(You feel yourself to be lost from sight only when you are intently suffering.)

For some, blessed by obscurity.

The more blessed, the more wobbly the borders between

parts, like the hair cut and sold, hair which is a thread from the head to the ethereal.)

The walls of a woman's womb contain the weakest living body, and in Hardy's stories there is often a miscarriage, or a child who dies. This event dispels all notions of margin, or border, because the air into which the weak extras fall is an air beyond experience.

An air of unrealized probabilities and untried survival.

A baby dies under the sign of lust alone, which is a blank.

Why else did the Church assign the ghosts of babies to Limbo where all is probable and nothing is tainted by having been?

The margins there are infinite. In Limbo dwell all those whom statistics leave out. Those who are not in heaven, not in hell, but somewhere hovering.

It is like a waste-field for the unexceptional, the undeveloped, the aborted and miscarried.

What happens in and to Limbo? Does it float around us? Do its souls ever escape from the possible into the good?

One fears the worst for those in Limbo—that they are outside of all attributes, unnamed, unclaimed, pure figures as transparent as glass, with nowhere to go.

Limbo is like a section of God—an invisible weight without boundaries. It exists in the range of consciousness; it holds what has slipped away, unnoticed. Like the half-formed cherubs emerging from clouds in paintings of the Annunciation, those in Limbo look happy about nothing.

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Babies died with their mothers, and alone, in large quantities until recently in the West, as they continue to do elsewhere around the world. They are banished to Limbo, then, where they wait for nothing, not even the Reckoning, because they have come from nothing in the way of experience.

Children in Hardy's novels seem to exist as probabilities, threats either in utero or near the central story, pulling characters into poverty. The presence of a child indicates a probable decline or disaster. The carrying of a child signals destitution.

One novel begins: "On an early winter afternoon, clear but cold, when the vegetable world was a weird multitude of skeletons through whose rise the sun shone freely, a gleaming landau came to a pause on the crest of a hill in Wessex."

In 1870, Hardy noted in his journal: "Mother's notion, and also mine: that a figure stands in our van with an arm uplifted, to knock us back from any prospect we indulge in as probable."

He took notes wherever he went, using the methodology of science that was becoming popular then. But he was always mesmerized by the blocked path, the road not taken. The action never made. The ghost of the lost became increasingly actual and threatening.

As a committed agnostic, he noticed that the war between body and soul is generally won by the body, which pleased him since he

was himself an erotic thinker, who generally took the woman's part. He remembered women at the same time that he saw them.

Marty South, in *The Woodlanders*, is a young spar-maker by night and apple-picker and presser by day. Her one claim to beauty is her hair—whose abundance is “almost unmanageable . . . its true shade a rare and beautiful approximation to chestnut.” A man wants to buy it from her to sell to a rich woman, and Mary says, “What belongs to me I keep.” He compares how much she makes at her difficult day and night jobs with what she would get for her hair, and before long, she is persuaded, and she sells her hair.

This transaction corresponds to the destruction of the orchards and woodlands in the story surrounding Marty South. The selling of part of her body—her tumultuous and luminous hair—is the ultimate symbol of a person's renunciation to the profiteers moving in on the land.

If any good story illuminates these three areas of truth—the psychological, the sociopolitical and the existential—then Hardy accomplishes that in several of his novels. The act of turning a page—like lifting a veil—when reading Hardy is to participate in entering haunted, beautiful paths.

The un-manifested, the un-realized and dis-appointed suffer in the margins and out into the space surrounding the book. They circulate unexpressed, but possibly so close to actualization as to fill the consciousness of the reader with their presence.

When a choice enters a story it enters as a tiny trap more than an opportunity. Once the choice is made—“written in”—it can't be

read as an error but as a fate. When the choice is influenced by casual moments—a storm, a letter blows away, or the face turns toward another; when the cruel words are uttered as easy speech or when the plan turns out to be an embarrassment—if it is now written in, it can't be written out.

None of us dares to say that a major choice we have made was a mistake.

We can't quite form such a judgment without fear. Instead, there is a retrospective accounting for all the contingencies that added up to the final selection.

Or we can do something that Hardy does.

We can see the whole sequence of events as always leading away from our arrival at the place where we really, originally wanted to be. We can see nothing but the absence of a progress; if anything, a circular turn, disruption, a raining down of distractions and misunderstandings.

The once-possible for a character becomes increasingly improbable.

The contradiction between the elusive and the trap is a contradiction inherent in story-writing itself.

How can something add up, when it is only conceived and then understood in reverse? By subtracting, until a lot of it is gone.

A tragic accident, for instance, means something terrible happened outside anyone's usual calculations. Even as you can go over every step that led to it—wishing you had chosen several other options during its progress—because it was never “probable,” it cannot be adequately explained backwards.

You have to cut (or add) certain passages in order to make the accident seem probable.

An accident can't be added to the account without changing everything around it to make it look inevitable.

Otherwise an accident in a plot is like a lost page. It falls out of the book as a coincidence, or an act of God or Nature—earthquake, twister, shark, volcano, car crash, fiery explosion.

It splits and empties what was moving along systematically. It isn't fair.

It is this question of fairness that haunts the pages of a story.

It is what is meant by a good plot. It is what is intended by any writer who says a story finally works.

The characters have received equal time and equal attention (not necessarily in the amount of writing ascribed to them) and have passed through a series of scenes, interacting, with respect for the community of sentences as being both judgments and fates.

A social logic prevails. It can be read backwards and forwards seamlessly.

(But the world was unimaginably unfair in Hardy's mind.)

His skeptical novels are precursors of secular mid-twentieth century novels, perhaps the last best example of that tradition that lingered from the preceding century. While they tell us what it was like to live in nineteenth-century England and what kinds of failures and chances could redirect the course of an ordinary per-

son's life when history imposed itself in sharp, spasmodic acts of destruction (industry). Hardy's pen is dipped in a metaphysical despair that Céline or Beckett would recognize.

His despair exceeds his subject, because it precedes it. He begins and stays at the half-turn, where, like a wounded angel, he has paused to look back and can't execute another move.

He reports on remorse. He reiterates the scene of the crime. He is mesmerized by it. A saturated landscape contains figures like the phantoms made of paint that trail across canvases.

The frame is immovable, the history closed on this "weather that the shepherd shuns."

Paradise may be the time when we can finally turn to our past and see that its beauty was there despite our being there. In fact, its beauty can finally be seen because we aren't there.

The purgatorial past is personal, it has your own smell and breath across it, and no matter how much you wish for the light to change, it stays gray and soaked in presence.

Old homes stare at you as if in a state of *unhope*.

"Spirit appears in Time, and it appears in Time just so long as it has not *grasped* its pure Notion, i.e., until it has annulled time. . . . Until Spirit has completed itself *in itself*, until it has completed itself as world-Spirit, it cannot reach its consummation as *self-conscious* Spirit." (Hegel)

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Fiction is concerned with victims of history, and the writer of fiction shares their plight by wrestling with the torturous clamp of plot. So plot traps the writer with his or her victims, just as history does.

What does it mean to finish writing a book?

It means that your plot has defeated you. You have been decided by its logic, which is finally insufferable. It has worked its spell on you. You have to end the book and get some air.

Now you can measure the consequences of a choice made on page seven with its outcome on page eighty-seven, measuring it against a character's contingent and ambient relationships; measuring it against temperament, consistency of response, and likelihood of the ability to choose at all; measuring it against outside forces, historical, sociological, existential—these are the ways that make the medium of fiction also the message of its content.

This is no dream, no indulgence, no sentimentality, but the study of justice. And a struggle with the cold lock of history.

Hardy late in life stopped writing fiction entirely and turned to poetry, where he continued to hover at the place where "drops on gate-bars hang in a row."

Veteran

I don't believe in ashes; some of the others do.
I don't believe in better or best; some of the others do.
I don't believe in a thousand flowers or the first robin
of the year or statues made of dust. Some of the others do
I don't believe in seeking sheet music
by Boston Common on a snowy day, don't believe
in the lighting of malls seasonably
When I'm sleeping I don't believe in time
as we own it, though some of the others might
Sad lace on green. Veterans stamping the leafy snow
I don't believe in holidays
long-lasting and artificial. Some of the others do
I don't believe in starlings of crenelated wings
I don't believe in berries, red & orange, hanging on
threadlike twigs. Some of the others do

①
I don't believe in the light on the river
moving with it or the green bulbs hanging on the elms
Outdoors, indoors, I don't believe in a gridlock of ripples
or the deep walls people live inside
Some of the others believe in food & drink & perfume
I don't. And I don't believe in shut-in time
for those who committed a crime
of passion. Like a sweetheart
of the iceberg or wings lost at sea
the wind is what I believe in,
the One that moves around each form

(2)

Conclusively

The night was almost too long to bear
Then there was evidence of mercy—a passing car—
milky air—and I could see
dry walls & gravel on the way to a highway
Atlantic for its grays

Loss is the fulfillment of the Law
Space collected on a long line

I was eliminated as a locus of mothering—
a she—physical but imaginary as a restless daughter

Why this body and not another

The one who came to destroy the works of women—their
offspring—
knew how many people were resisting incarnation
He counted on them by accommodating them

Guilt relieving guilt
is the get of killers whose mouths shine
I can't say enough about this—red because sore
& polished because wet

One died to become the spirit-guide
Before that time
there were second persons in everything
Then saints, then no one
to guide anyone to heaven
Cosmic expansion has gone in its preferred direction

I can hear the hour, this never
happened to me before
One day I will shake the blue sky from my hair
and slip back to consciousness—
the thing that is always aware
with or without a living creature to share its pleasures

3
Tonight I request the precious gift of final perseverance
shored up in my sheets
not far from a predawn holocaust
of travelling children

(4)

The Quietist

Mad God, mad thought
Take me for a walk
Stalk me. Made God,
Wake me with your words.
Believe in what I said

Just shadows
Shadows on sheets
Grass, seed . . .

Push my anguish down—
Coffee, smokes & creams—
Tongue-dainties
To scare compulsion away
Compulsion to die

My bedclothes were stuffed with ashes
The spreads were incarnadine

Our match had burned at both ends
Since temptation concludes where the middle is nothing

Can a desire be a mistake?
The theme can be wrong, but not the music

And I lay there dying
For my asylum

Was myself

Two waters—squared
by an alley—

Three acorns—
One wet chair

Several yellow
chestnuts—

A man's erect
nipples

It was enemy class
travel

with the devil
who's red for a reason

Pleasure bloodies his underskin
Thin skin

The holy one called:
"Just keep that word in your mouth
Let the sound behind it out."

Slippery-like. Rain loosens dirt
From nails on the crucifix
And where the rose likes the mud it lives in

Soothing cloth and chalice
When I taste "God" I taste bread

What does serpent mean?
Bite your own tendon
One has to die
The dirty parrot
On a bar in my brain
Means squalid. Repetitive.
Who daily says "clavichord".
Daily says "divine"

Sex is made on a bed which is too loose
Or too hard
Arrows & burning thoughts included
Some are more released by cords
Around their hands than intercourse
But either one
Will die if there is no pain

Zero built a nest
In my navel. Incurable
Longing. Blood too—
From violent actions
It's a nest belonging to one
But zero uses it
And its pleasure is its own

When she was alone in her cell, she didn't exist
Only bliss. Clay angels
Popped off the walls outside, one fate
For each shape, the highways
Couldn't be reversed

A maximum amount of randomness
—raindrops, invisible aerial holes—
Against a minimum amount of order—
Her body—compact—organs
In rows depending on use

Laughter—or slaughter—outside the door
And inside she was dying
To join in. So she had to go out
—a physical body

With subjective needs
Wing with the post-Christians. Her brow a headline
Reporting news of weather & mood

From masters of the military & amorous arts
Hide in her little close
Off the runway, or step into their story

Scape and Bell

1.

Once I was in bed with the children, it was early in the day
Not even light at eight o'clock in Ireland.

Well, just getting light and we were surrounded by stones
And the Atlantic and the night wind had settled down.
The baby screamed down the hall.

Outside the sea was lashing the backs of the waves with whips.
The curlews still sang.

I was reading *The Secret Garden* so the kids would feel safe
Because the dangers were in another room close by,
Not outside in the rocks, sea and slime,
Not even in the sky except as prophecy.

It was the first AA hour when the priests and police met out
of uniform.

The night had gone like a thread of logic that can't be sustained.
The shades were pulled down.

Does a thing go somewhere else or disappear?
Music for instance, *The Quartet for the End of Time*.
I will ask a little boy to let me know
When he grows up to be a musician.

The lyric is a form of human thought computing numbers
And how they relate to each other, especially through their
letters.

Fog and winter light.
Twig-trees, flat fields and an olive tree
Were covered by hay to keep it alive.
Silver and tough evergreen, 15th century walls,
The tragic sand long ago
Absorbed the souls of those who drowned.

We live in a medieval world.
Nothing is real that can't be found.
Many faces in the earth below and sperm in the sea.
This is the promised wilderness.
Who can go nowhere?

From one word to another, the uncreated stays thought.
What can you make of being nowhere?
There is the clunk of the back of the ship going up.
There is the dull buzz of the water below.
Cabin fever, yellow sheets.

The Western person is a mass person.
We can only go inside to hide.

2.

Between Roundstone and Clifden
There lives a priest named Dunleavy who is kind.
He says, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things
I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can
And the wisdom to know the difference."

In many countries Mass is celebrated
Every two weeks by a priest from a faraway place
Who travels from parish to parish and in between
Someone passes out the consecrated host to those who seek it.

A monk said, "This will increasingly become the case around
the world,
And suit our nomadic spirit. A new kind of priest will be a
woman
At home with bread to put into the palms of her neighbors.

10
She will receive a kit containing the eucharist and a manual.
It will sit in her cupboard with cereal, salt, oil and jam.

In times of natural disaster (famine, war, drought) the woman
will pass
Her neighbors a consecrated leaf of grass
With all the usual words of blessing. *Fine. Good. Let it be.*"

3.

The children loved the strangers when they were kind.
Paul held one's hand and Peter called the other Darling.

A Sherman tank was festooned with snow.
Gold snow, pink snow, silver snow, blue snow.

Sex and d—th arrive together everywhere.
Did you know? This is my report.
Experience is ambiguous.

Prayer weak as a worm uncurled on my pillow.
We were all waiting for the pandemic
To hurry things along.

The long way is flat because you take half-steps.
There's a stone at the end or a glove-full of ashes.

4.

A person is an emission.
A jet of light speeding alongside the others.

All of us glowing, our faces twisted
With the effort, shot forward but trying to decide.

Being a bullet with heart would be about the same.
Not a plane full of killers, not a bird.

War comes at you anyway, since people prepare.
An embrace of opposites, how nations
Get to know each other well.

A salacious leap on the women and buildings fall down.
At home the mean men just play war games on airplanes
Or watch sex.

Night drivers in the motel parking lot
Give me the only light I've got.
Without them I would be stuck at the mouth of sleep.

5.

Travelers and immigrants, know your colors.

Eternity is black, infinity is blue, a desert is yellow

And the river is green. Belief is orange.
The horizon is silver.

If something is small, paint it red.
If something is big, make it shine.

If it's a golden memory, the task
Is to turn it back into wheat.

Night

The night is July, the aura is rain.
The bay is always at low tide.
Green slime covers the sand
Where herons stop, look and listen.
The sand is as thin as clay.

Men in the night
Leave their caravans and run
Across black grass
To the River Argideen
To claim a position for fishing
Like waiting at baggage claim.

The people in the temperance hall
Hold a dance that most of them watch
From their chairs bitterly.
They can see their shoes are history.

The world was remade before they died.

The herons on the Lee
Are slick with slime, fermenting.
Lots of money is exchanged
In the medieval town.
Beer is fomented in silver silos
And no fish swim. One day down
Carpe diem.
No one knows what's coming.

The nuclear weapons programs continue.
A boy in a trap drawn by an elegant horse
Trots through Clonakilty.
Men watch and women shop.
Organic food planted in the middle

Of gourmet olives and jellies.
Thanks and help

Are prayer words in fair trade and churches.

Just go in and have a drink at dark.
It's a kind of Sabbath.
In a public house you feel safe with the others.

By now you know the black river has fish
And flowers on it white and shaped
Like strawberry plants.
Two neon kingfishers speed by blue.

Everyone is there for everyone else's fun.
Those men in the night aren't so bad.

A body: this is what it feels
And this is what it feels like.

Sites of massacre and ashes, tin-topped rubble,
Porcelain ovens, jails, a waiting hospital.

Not when it's eternal low tide in a place outside
And birds drain the sand with their appetites.

The Question

So why, then, did you leave the village
Of your childhood?

Why did you opt for a gray and brutalist zone
Devoted to might and money

Unless you wanted some?
Why else?

In the airport restaurants you smell shit,
And in the motel fabrics

Sex and smoke make you gag.

Restless business men, too many of them,
Blink into machines they carry on the planes.

Discarded anti-depressants
Are replaced by vodka and cranberry.

They call women by their wives' names.
They have medicinal eyes
That can't cure anyone.
You go up to 33,000 feet

With an abject army of travelers
Some wear pale army fatigues around the terminals.

When the soldiers see themselves
In plate glass reflections, they are proud
To be protecting this free-for-all.
Be grateful!
They *are* heroes!

Why did you leave the village
To help support these things
With your interest?

To what end?
To bury yourself alive among millions!
To suffer work without reward!
Do you prefer to remember more than to live
Inside the limits offered to you at birth?

That village was made of intelligent stones.
(Stones have brains too.)
Its port was built on a gentle bay
And among all the swimmers--
Their penises and eggs and genius--
Even the shark
(A symbol of the modern world)
Served a function.
A fish knows what it is. Even the clouds
Are mindful and the rain burns up thought
Falling from consciousness into all these brains
Made of the same matter.

Why did you walk out from under the stars
Of your ordinary town?
Why carry your soul the child through dishes
Of hors d'oeuvres (as a waiter), gossip
And even participate in the conversation?
The shrubs need watering.
The birds are dry.
The trees are rotting from lack of attention.
Why didn't you care for them?
You are too late to analyze
Or care for the economy and its competitions.
This is the sad part.
You left home in order to find a home.
You wanted to build it yourself this time.

Why else seek with such fervor
And uncertainty

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The fragments of the familiar?
To think of yourself this way as special?
The only one for the job?

Did you leave in order to track red lights and green
Through the traffic because they looked like Christmas?
To taste the bitter honey on
A stranger's tongue—
To hear him roaring instructions
To people poorer than he—
To be reminded of your teacher?
To see in his cold green eyes
A drop of the sea you played in?
In his hairy chest a replication
Of your father who protected you?
Is that why you went?

Did you leave in order to retrieve
These little bits of experience
And add them to your secret cache?
So you could bring them back
And give a lecture on what you discovered:
That specks of the lost
Can only be identified as "lost."

Why didn't you just stay home?
Once you were a carrier of both child and soul
But when you became a self
You bundled them up
And took them out of the city limits.
You lacked the capacity for carrying so much.

Still, you wanted to rebuild your village
Out of the pieces that shine and remind you
How safe and happy you were on its park benches
On days of no school.
Why did you leave your native country

To become a different kind of being:

A realist

Who can recognize and classify the pieces of the lost.

To be the only one!

It's true they sparkle as they vanish

And finding them lets you know you are credible,

At home in the world.

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