

# **The Sea Path**

**Ciarán  
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**Smithereens Press**



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Ciarán O'Rourke



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The Sea Path

## Fresh Air

*(Winslow Homer, 1878)*

The wind grows new forever  
on this hill-top, as I watch  
the leaves swim backwards  
in their cave-deep daub  
of cloud behind you, loving  
how the soar of sun you stand in  
perfects the bright dial  
of your shoe-buckles, and spills  
into the lapse your hands inhabit  
quietly as shells. The greatest  
loveliness might be now,  
though, when I see slowly  
this sudden freshness has heaved  
through everything the portrait  
pictures, except your gaze  
– you are here and elsewhere  
in the same escaping breath.  
Or else imagining then, after,  
that perhaps you wake to it  
when the picture finishes,  
this ordinary thought you hold,  
which the painter wondered  
into sunlit nearness, so  
you are real and remote  
in the way that gull-shape is,  
lingering high above  
your dreaming head,  
flung to the world  
in a veer of blue.

## For a Garden Slug

The  
long  
vowel  
the grass  
makes  
of your body  
takes the shape  
of music in our eyes  
as you pull away  
from sudden  
sun-pools your  
fluent love of  
stone and grass,  
your liquid purr  
and fingering of  
  
the green blades  
becoming the words  
a cello might  
have known  
before the touch  
of human hands,  
as you move, one  
perfecting limb,  
to form verbs  
of petal-hush  
and the dull mud,  
as if to render  
visible in this space  
a whisper of

the quiet,  
quavered  
shadow-light  
you speak,  
mouthing  
in the slow  
passage  
of your trail  
the soft truths  
which slugs  
can sing:  
*here is*  
*m m*  
*y y*  
*b s*  
*o o*  
*d n*  
*y g*

## Martello

Sun out  
on the sea path  
and a grey wave rising  
in my chest  
as I wade with you  
into an April tide,  
watching two terns  
dangle the breeze  
before their one  
pure, spearing dive  
through water,  
which I miss in my  
less elegant attempt,  
rushing the element  
in a sudden gulp  
of need, and thinking,  
as my body learns  
itself again  
in the tidal seep  
of ice through limbs,  
that you and I  
were made for this  
old beat of want  
the sea imprints each year  
on sandy minds,  
that a bare-backed,  
part-painful ritual like this  
can be as clear  
as water, and is best,  
knowing the heavy

ocean-pull of life  
to be both now  
and here, in the fish-quick  
dart and dip  
of our own two hearts,  
human still,  
and swimming  
into Spring.

## Sea Stones

Why try trace  
a footprint in the breeze

this way, an echo  
furled in dust and air?

The broken shore  
was ours alone,

leaning in  
to one another

as the water whispered  
and the starlight fell.

~

Fresh from the sea,  
cicadas singing  
in our heads,

we surveyed the kingdom  
we had climbed away from,

the vineyards lush  
with martyrs' blood,

Charlemagne's dream  
of earth-lit oceans

rising round us  
in the summer heat.

~

Higher still,  
a flock of sea-birds

dragged its net  
across the sun, omen

of a sky all swelt  
with foreign rains,

which soon  
moved in,

the dark air  
trembling

with an eye-  
blue light.

~

My sight strung  
to the kite  
of your back,

long and lovely  
and supple with  
spindrift, the seas

breaking across my  
feet, and you  
in the turn

and sway of  
it all, spooling  
me close, through

the burning wind.

~

Days after you go,  
a storm invades  
the midnight air:

shruggle of thunder  
on the shore-line, sea-stones  
rattling the pane.

Pausing to write you  
a note of it, I find

a small bird  
still hurtles  
in its cage,

bullows its wings  
against my heart.

~

The sun's empire  
will be safe forever  
on this frontier

of red rooftiles  
and olive walls,  
these rooms

to which  
we may return  
sometime,

to grow old  
at last  
in the long nights.

## **Guatemala, 1967**

*(Otto René Castillo, 1936-1967)*

Say nation,  
and the deer and moon  
unlatch a shadow;

the darkness  
quicken;  
a candle blows.

Say water,  
and thirst assumes  
a human shape:

the man  
whose mouth  
defied the desert,

whose lips  
the owners of the rain  
would govern,

whose throat  
the street-patrolling  
prison-guards would smash.

Say pain,  
and the concrete  
barracks' walls

are politic with light:  
in the blood-loud night  
the shutters glisten,

the darkened windows  
flash and gleam;  
next door, nearby,

across the world,  
a thousand silences conspire  
to regulate the scream.

Say beauty,  
and perhaps, my love,  
I'll find your form again,

my tongue journeying  
the valleys, my fingers  
rivering the slopes,

in search of quietness,  
of storms,  
and the real dawn

always gaining,  
to burn the blue half-  
sleep of it to air.

Or perhaps it's you  
I'll see, my country,  
with a hope grown vivid

at the edge of vision:  
in the slum, in the mud,  
on the stricken hills,

in the book of laughter,  
in the nameless streets,  
in the fists

of language lifting  
with the stars and sun,  
in the flickered flame.

Say poetry,  
and the voices  
of the sick

might rise tomorrow,  
the faces of the earth  
might smile.

## Still Life of Peaches and Figs

*(Paul Cézanne, 1890)*

This time  
I'm sending peaches,  
and a summer's sun  
that dawdles in  
on last year's kitchen  
where the plates  
are never empty.

Pure vowels  
of the unperfected  
morning, they are  
lain or left out  
in whatever  
slow tumble  
of fruit-fall  
they fell from,  
casual as rain.

And figs! Echo-  
shaped, but so sure  
in their small  
altering of light,  
they remake  
the room entirely.

Oh, love, I know:  
all of this you've heard  
before, and words  
are neither round nor heavy

in the way fruit is,  
nor soft enough  
to satisfy the mouth  
or fill the aching palm.

Only, it was not the fruit  
of poems that I was sending,  
but another easy, breathing,  
blemishable thing.

The thought, perhaps,  
which if I wished enough  
would sail through years  
of oceanic air  
unchanged,

or need of mine,  
which might rain through  
a sea-bright room  
as stirred to life  
as this one is,  
to fall, by some half-  
miracle of love  
or hunger,  
whole at last  
into your open hands.

## Man Kneeling in Grass

*(Francis Bacon, 1952)*

It must be good  
to fall like this  
in some dark space  
of the mind, and find  
your body feeling, after all,  
the total metaphor  
of rushes and earth  
grow to softness  
across your knees  
and rise, furring your arms  
to the elbow  
with the swish and smell  
of meadow-grass  
and elemental ground.  
Or perhaps  
the swilling wish persists,  
in this rectangular  
corridor of night  
I catch you in,  
to sink through earth  
and ache forever  
in the well-deep nightmare  
there, like stone.  
Such grief, I think, could  
only animate my own  
small weight of need  
in watching you: to send  
the breeze of light  
already trickling

through your scene  
to flood the grass  
and lift your mud-grey torso  
from its shell.  
I might hear you then,  
brother, if you whispered  
from your half-  
factual meadow-room,  
that it is good  
to have knelt  
your body in the grass  
like this, and grown  
as actual in learning it  
as darkness was,  
as real and human  
in the midnight hour  
as any absence is.

## Hospice

What poem  
or prayer is there  
to call this animal to heel,

that webs your body so,  
and skulks  
in every whrum of blood,

ready to feast  
when you speak, or rise,  
or raise an arm,

and what  
bone-dull element  
is Need to us, who cannot alter

or undo  
the rock-dumb motion  
of this room,

which sways  
to keep you  
from the waking world:

the rigid chair, the rolling  
desk, this week's flowers,  
and the water-glass.

Against the ugliness  
your walls contrive,  
these things grow still,

till all that's left  
is the window  
opposite your seat,

to which  
the bleak rain beats,  
and the wetting wind.

So think beyond,  
to the sounds of home  
and the carried sun,

to the high morning  
begun again,  
the water rustling

and the rain  
still green –  
to walk out

in summertime, a furl  
of swallows lifting,  
and the Barr Road bare.

We lean in, close  
as breath to you,  
and whisper news,

as if to make  
grief ripple,  
life break through,

to see you sit  
without contagion,  
your hands at ease,

or leave entirely,  
your shadow flying  
from the sickbed sheets,

like a sun-  
set suddenness  
seeping the sedge,

the corncrake  
croaking love tomorrow  
at the island's edge.

## Burying Turnus

*(Juturna speaking, his sister; Virgil's Aeneid, Book XII, ll.872-884)*

Could I slow the sun, retain  
the heat of seconds in the air,  
let shadows tremble

round the dial, by art,  
or skill, or barely human need,  
to hold you here, my brother,

far from the gnash  
of falling wings, from Death  
the monster, and his calling lair,

to hold you back, brother,  
from the gap you enter,  
this darkness you've become – but how?

And how could a sister,  
a nymph like me, a grieving girl,  
a soul to flowing mosses

and to floods, how can I,  
immortal as the rain, as swept  
and washed with loss of you,

how will I beat the earth  
to ease your limbs,  
how heal the stillness

that you've sunk into:  
the blood-shut eyes, the un-  
responding mouth – what can I do?

And since you're gone  
from fact and life, if not  
from dreams – what god,

what murmur-loving listener,  
in room or cloud, am I  
forever speaking to?

Will your words repeal  
the river? Your hands  
scoop out

the spring-  
suggesting ground?  
If not to bring him back,

cleansing the hair,  
the blinking skin, then  
to lower me down,

down to the black, half-  
empty, sleepless place,  
where I might join

my brother, and  
the disembodied others,  
in the lonely heaven.

## The Killing March

*(Miklós Radnóti, 1909-1944)*

Each day permits  
the old atrocities  
again –

the necessary deaths,  
the far-off scream  
come near,

the itch of madness  
spreading  
on the hands and hair.

History is one  
disaster, feeding  
off another, or

what poems are made  
to witness  
and withstand.

You taught us that;  
or someone did,  
whose teaching stemmed

from what he saw,  
from the hunger hushing  
through him like a mist,

his head adrift  
with grief, or sleep,  
but not dead yet

on the killing march.  
Against all murderous  
decrees, and against

the unreturning cities  
razed, the angel  
drowning in the bricks,

the roads  
where beggars roam  
and drop, it's true:

the oak trees  
still are breathing,  
and the fist,

which ice and metal  
hammered once,  
can furl

to feel the winter  
easing,  
in a luff of rain.

So it is, poet,  
in this barbaric language,  
built from pain,

I imagine echoings  
to be enough  
to raise

your sightless eyes  
and famine face,  
and faith

in breath, a force  
to conjure  
youth again:

that place  
of which, you say,  
the music speaks

in mutter-tongues  
and Morse. Love-poet,  
eternal pastoralist,

in the din of one more  
ending world,  
I commemorate your corpse.

## Sunlight

*(William Orpen, 1925)*

Try as I might  
to follow  
the slow geometries  
of flesh – from  
your dipping leg,  
along your hip,  
to the pink  
perfection of your neck –  
catching every detail,  
possessing the always  
fuller picture  
of your loops and lines,  
you continue  
to elude the graph,  
your face  
a delicate elision,  
your fingers dim  
in their pertinent work,  
your breasts  
half-hidden  
by light's transparent  
easing into place,  
sliding like an ill-  
timed lover  
through the window,  
impolitely  
turning up the colours  
as it goes,  
so each drape

and naked rumple  
of the furniture  
has come to match  
the pallor  
of the sun on skin,  
and the flounce  
of sweat-black hair  
above your ear  
grows clear,  
as if suggesting  
what shade and stocking  
on your outstretched foot  
conceal –  
your shadow spaces,  
lush still, and secreted,  
for all the morning's  
baring heat,  
reminder, perhaps,  
of the eye  
that yearns for  
what the skin remembers,  
or that flame-  
dark blaze, which  
returns as water  
to the window-pane  
next day,  
to fill each crack  
and crinkle  
that the night laid plain,  
washing the room  
with want again.

## The Home

(i)

None of the instruments will do,  
the keys are obsolete, the keypads

packed for dispatch, the unplugged house ajar  
and gusting with the gap of reading lamps,

spare radios, the jazz collection disarrayed,  
your TV coiled and crouching on the floor,

its day- and night-lights out for good.  
Nothing restores to its proper calm:

the sub-text of small dissemblings, electric  
needs, gives way to base-noise, hush.

And yet your hands persist against the sound,  
somehow carrying a fruit-bowl towards me,

as if the fruit might simmer to the rim,  
evaporate as breath, or the rim itself

dissimulate, its stone-deep sureties  
unsettling form, to vanish before your eyes.

(ii)

No matter how orderly the world becomes,  
which every minute hoarded in this house

has made chaotic, scatter-lifed, and true  
to randomness, and no matter how quietly

your touch withdraws from book-sleeves,  
cabinets, picture-frames, accedes to clearance

as the shelves dismantle anyway,  
the windows start unlearning light,

right now I still am standing on the edge  
of stillness – total, blameless, sweeping in –

and the basin in my arms, marked 'Misc.',  
remains the core of all things here,

each sun-blotched photograph a heartbeat  
this hesitation greatens to possess.

(iii)

Once the air remakes itself, and the walls resume  
their wind-shunning, functional routines

without our bodies moving in-between, quietly  
taking measure of resultant warmth, the life

retained by air or walls, and in the time taken  
for shadows to perfect their shape in keyholes, hallway,

kitchen sink, without the bric-a-brac of breath  
to intervene, will something same-like

have clarified in us, some play of tangibilities reset,  
so the windows in our minds go glazed, the doorways

change their faces and the carpets shed their skins,  
will the rhythm of floorboards come loose inside the sole,

or, as if memory depended on touch or proximation,  
the house we left our lives in disentangle from the flesh,

and, forgotten, walk off without a whisper, float free?

## Keepsake

The stone  
I cannot part with –

I anchor it daily  
on the deep sea-bed  
of pages by my desk,  
a weight for paper  
and for poems,  
heartbeat-heavy,  
but light enough  
to let the summer whisper  
in the sheaf  
when windows open,  
or when I leave,  
thereby keeping,  
in its skull-dull, colourless,  
life-perfecting way,  
the rhythm  
of this room adrift,

and your image, too,  
pocketing sea-stones  
years ago, your  
white dress bright  
on the eye-grey shore,  
and you smiling there,  
as if our wave's  
unlovely sunder  
would not come,  
or as though the ocean

might remember touch,  
the particles  
be flung again  
as longing  
from your fists.

Like here,  
where words  
must delve until  
the element resists,  
and the vivid  
breath rebuild itself  
from the little that persists.

## The Prisoner

*(Photograph of Keith Douglas)*

The photographer  
has shot too soon,  
so you'll stand

like this forever;  
unappeased,  
reticent,

your uniform heat-  
creased, eyes widened  
for the rain

that may fall daily there  
to burn a thrumming life  
to dust.

Finding you this way,  
opened onto  
on a page your diffidence defies,

the past becomes  
what later  
knowledge lacks,

the fact  
before the story  
of the fact, perhaps,

or the watch-strap  
tightened  
on a boyish wrist,

and the man  
not checking it  
as the camera strikes.

And yet, to look again,  
there is space, too, behind  
your fierce unreadiness

for softness  
to unfold itself; enough  
even for the poet

to stir in this image  
of soldier, son, and lover still,  
and show

which verve of air  
and coolness out of earth  
were yours that day,

and which our own  
in the imprecise  
perfections of the past

we wreak. Wanting you  
so remembered, I feel  
that I could wait

a thousand hours  
for your gun-dark gaze  
to clamber

out of the stifled light  
you're wrapped inside,  
and blink un-

photographed,  
near with words,  
on the heat-forgiven sand.

A fly enters the room  
in which these wishes writhe,  
lights on the hand

that would grip time's net  
like this, and shake you  
out of it, lithe with life.

For an instant, history  
is an insect, caressing skin,  
and what poetry there was

vanishes, in which you'd lift  
your frantic cigarette  
to mouth, and speak.

Learning from your reticence,  
I know  
that when this creature

escapes the brittle cage  
of my attention  
I may return

to press the living weight  
of breath  
impossibly through air

until your  
almost poetic  
poet self walks free.

Though, as I look  
from your unmoving  
portrait now,

it seems that being true  
to that half-gentle, grim-  
lipped glance you give,

I must note with care  
this fly that squats  
so curiously

on the slope  
of my wrist –  
yes, and try

to replicate  
the immense, inhuman  
watchfulness

in its tiny poise,  
its eyes and fingers  
beautifully unfearful

of what my bone-  
dull hand conveys:  
a stillness

total as your picture's is,  
but riddled also  
with heat

in the mind, the sun-  
caught suddenness there,  
and the blood-beats.

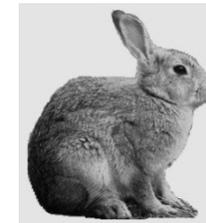


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