

The English Channel and Other Poems

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The English Channel

I.

The requisite, of course, is to look at the sea's gray slate,
To calibrate vision—just so—to accommodate the particulars of light
That by now are transfusing the atmosphere with a shot
Of tangerine, incarnadine and a burn of green at the sky's edge—
Not to compare and contrast the vista with all the previously felt
Remembrances but to take them all in, deliberate conjugations
Of matter creating such fantabulous tricks, without
Any help or worry from outside force, brutal in their thanklessness
That by now, even the waves lashing at the shingle beach
(Each pebble a round echo of the initial stirring) are construed
As simply evocations of a subterranean machinery and
The remnant surf scattering tatters of lace on the shore
As merely air captured by salt water. What we hear then
Is unhusked from the terror it inspires, scattering among
The fishermen's quarters painted in black, the cliff
And its funicular, now murmuring on the seaside estate
Of East Sussex, its vernacular lost among the pelican cries.

II.

Surely, no ocean can be seen for the first time. What varies
Is merely vantage point, say five o'clock in the afternoon
This early autumn, near the unfinished dock, the parking lot,
At the shortest possible distance between France and England.
As the English Channel spills its wild cadence, packing
Its every iamb with evil force, I simultaneously see and hear
All the other bodies of water seen and heard in Pagudpod,
Palawan, Panglao which inflect this vision with their motions
And insinuations, tinkering with the coloring of the sea,
Draining away the novelty until at last, this is *déjà vu*
With a reference more pivotal than a dream, the breath
Already modulated into normal frequency and the eyes,
Previously blameless in the absence of intent, now scour
The roots of the waves with hard-fast familiarity, tipping
The sun's grandiose ink across the diminished gray,
Chastised by the absence of dangerous cargoes and ships,
Reduced only to this: a blank, unserviceable sheet.

III.

And yet, this is the same sea that madly summons language
On my part, asking to be reconstituted into noble parts,
Not in its entirety when at last it is almost irrelevant
In its billions-of-years eternity, rolling and rolling
Not knowing when to stop, but in this particular slice
Of the northern hemisphere, stilled as it were like a bolt
Of intensity in my mind, dying into a syllable from which
It will rise and tremble in its newfound form: aglitter. Sadly,
It is I who have approached the sea, asking for its blessing.
It has nothing to do with me except to release its archetype,
Prove its immense power beyond doubt. I see what I want
To see, find what I want to find, and this is because
I am helpless against the sea's durability, its pebbles
That will survive longer than all the dialects enlivened
By our throats. The sea inside me will not spill into
The English Channel funneling into the Atlantic, and I am
Looking for the right word for this particular loneliness.

The Infidel in the Kitchen

How he shuffles with no motive and intent—
His feet shod in hotel slippers—checking
Out his ref for preludes of a meal because it is late,
Because the dusk has complicated the light.

Should we judge him for his solitude,
His particular impoverishment, that whenever
He inspects a patch of rot in a vegetable,
He, in his attention, doesn't once waver,

Doesn't call it as mystery? His hunger is holy.
No family upstairs that needs to be fed.
In the living room, a television flickers
Its multitudinous hues. It exists unwatched.

Nothing conspires against the old bachelor
As he, thumb on the blunt nape of the knife,
Splits the onion into two. His eyes tear
From the minute suffering of the given.

If you watch him stride through his window
At this very hour, you will see a monk,
His bald patch his tonsure, confident
In the gesture of his devotional task:

When he turns its knob and hears a click,
A stove will flourish into fire. The pan sizzles:
Oil and water negotiating their boundaries,
Smoke assailing the ceiling like the menace

Of manna. After this commonplace ritual,
He knows whereof he sits: in a chair in front
Of his dinner, in the kitchen that floats
In space, like the planet outside of it.

Mountain Province

The moon douses the pines
With chemical light,
Soaking their roots as if,

By scalding them as such,
Something of earth
In its blind sleep would

Reveal itself: silver,
Contiguous, indefatigable,
That which will prove

The landscape in its un-
Movingness is a fraud
And the tight rings of trees

Are propelled outward
By its generous spirit.
Instead of stepping out

And witnessing this
Transubstantiation
In a grand scale, this

Once-in-a-lifetime thaw,
We choose our privacies,
Not wanting this intrusion.

What we want is to go on
With our lives untouched
By the unknown, confident

In our knowledge that
Our own earthly powers
Will suffice or simply,

That the night, no longer
Young, is just wiping
Her own mirror in the haze.

On My Way to the Suite Vollard

In a train, stuffed with all folks of life
I saw a young man of beauty, height,
Tall enough to meet my gaze—hard

As it was to feign modesty when
His neck, luminous with sweat
(Ditto his chin, daubed with a wet-
Ness that made his buttery skin

Look even more holy, delectable)
And holding a face of supreme proportion
Was worth every second of attention,
As if to miss one would mean incalculable

Suffering on my part and so I, with
A chance to sit down, remained standing
And took note of the cardigan cladding
His chest that tapered at the waist, the fit

Pair of gray denim hugging his thighs,
Knees, calves, the ramrod bones of ankles.
Back to his face: a study in well-
Ness, it held the slits of his eyes

As base to the perfect triangle whose
Tip was the deft notch on his upper lip.
His cheekbones, soaring diagonals, kept
Their alignment with the jaw. Close-

Up: even his eyebrows were perfect.
I wanted him to utter a word
So at last he could step into my world
In speech and not just be this spectacle set

On a drifting cloud of anonymity
That would any moment disappear.
I willfully missed my stop, and another.
What he did, as the indifferent city

Unspooled its scenery, was sneeze
Three times, not consecutively (yes, I counted),
Which rendered on his cheeks, a tint of red.
Before I could get seized by the police

For a crime I was no doubt committing,
The young man—who I'm sure
Never sinned even once, pure
From birth to death—alighted, joining

The throng of passengers, his back
Showing a posture of delicateness
As he shouldered with no self-awareness
A backpack. My private vice vanished; my luck

Was up. I rehearsed him in my mind, not let
It smudge my life's one good, sorrowing thing.
Later, I would linger at a Picasso etching:
Sculpture of a Young Man with a Goblet.

Upriver

Confined into narrow boats—essentially coffins—
Motorized as if by afterthought, painted with
The blue of the tropics, set on a course upriver,
Off to the dappled interior of Sarawak we enter.

Extravagant doesn't even begin to describe
This shameless showmanship of light as it strives
In earnest to speckle our bodies, the radiant flesh
Of marine animals too far from here. Your English

Is rendered useless—the eye of the camera captures
The greens better than language—and the lurch
Of the boat unannounced can't be summarized
By the curt, "*That was fast.*" The wood prized

For this purpose is waterproof, meant to skid
On river stones so what we experience, instead
Of the clench of the current, is the failure of grasp,
The river giving way. When the hull strands

On a dry segment—the grit underneath jarring
The spine—it is time to let the rapt, hovering
Mind take stock of what it can colonize: roots,
Orchids, bromeliads, bridges plaited in rope.

We aren't sure whether the present resides
In this forest which, in seamless strokes, braids
The almost timeless with the eternally fleeting:
Newts, sultans, travelers, creatures still evolving

Sight. When we take in the jungle this way,
What do we fail to see? Strands of now, the lay
Of the land simultaneously rolling from both
Sides of the banks? If so, what is this boat

Other than a stilling element for our attention,
Affirming maplessly an assured destination?
How would this perspective inflect our tongues
With the spare crystal of a new clarity? An

Orangutan swinging in the leaves is what
I want to see, rare as the sighting of the white
Raja who, more than a century ago, once paced
These Bornean forests, keeping the peace.

Song

There's nothing I can tell you that you don't know yet
Or at least haven't heard about—only, you have set
Plenty of things to do for the day and firmly decided
To disengage from the philosophy of the fools so-called,
Declaring allegiance, in the face of unwithering belief
In yourself, to the tight slots of the quotidian, bereft

Of music and spectacle, picked terribly clean of oracle
And superstition, their sole, susurrating miracle
Is that they allow you to live without complication
And the tragedy of endless rhymes and repetitions,
The sheer ardor of it all being resolved to the world's
Immaculate plainness, tufts of slight, windless words

Nodding their heads in agreement. "What's wrong
With waking up and interrupting the morning's song
To brush my teeth and tie my shoes, do my work
And pay my taxes," you ask. Nothing, and your luck
Is something I respect, no condescension there.
After all, the revealed is something I truly adore

Since at first glance, the universe needs no improve-
ment on our part, operating its majestic improv
Without any audience and theater, rehabilitating
Its innumerable cells, shedding the excess, rounding
Life's corners to distinct awareness and flickering sight.
Indeed, we are all lucky to be here and alive!

What's the use then, as you imply, of dreaming
And tinkering, of pursuing lightning and building
Empires—the many way of killing time—when
We have been launched adrift at the onset, challenged
And buffeted from all sides and all we want to do
Is to cross the channel with the littlest pain and woe.

But that doesn't mean we play fence-sitters only,
See the ball but not the game, the forest from the trees.
The city where you are now has transpired through
Hits and misses, the countless attempts to make it new.
He who resists inertia is the messiah—no happenstance.
Your life is purchased by chance so you can dance.