

Spaces in Between

A fragmentary literary nonfiction work exploring migration, memory, silence, belonging and lament.

Selected Extracts

1. The Boy Before the Man
2. Lament
3. Leaving
4. Meeting the Man
5. Nan

1. The Boy Before the Man

There is a sepia miniature in a tarnished silver frame.
Wee Willy is dressed as a Good Shepherd.
A rosette atop the outsized Tam o' Shanter
Perched on the back of his head.
A knitted shawl pinned across one shoulder.
In his tiny hand — a crook.

He is four.

He looks directly out of the photograph.
Almost smiling.
Not solemn.

His dark eyes simply there.

The same eyes that travelled
Across the silent seas.

It sits beneath a Peace Lily.
Tuesday is plant day.
A cup of water and a quarter turn.
I dust this photograph every Tuesday.

Who is this child
who has crossed an ocean?
I did not know him then.
I did not know him later.
But I knew the distance.
Every Hogmanay he sang of his Ain Folk.
He never saw them again.

2. Lament

Mrs. Kennedy went to Stringybark Creek
to get some sign of her husband
that the Kelly gang had murdered.

*...Five days of rain have removed every last trace of you.
Perhaps a wayward bullet that missed your soft white chest
has lodged in a tree... nothing...
Not even your watch
to pass to our boy...*

Lamenting passed from one generation
to the next
and the next.

Culloden Moor
The sky and the heather
Heaving sighs of sorrow.

A Lone Piper
High on the Battlements of Edinburgh Castle
Calling loss and capitulation

How does a ten year old boy
grieve the loss of a mother?

Songs:
Over the sea to Skye
My Ain Folk

The pits.
The grief of the father.

Movement from one place to another.

Was that ten year old Good Shepherd ever heard?

Did the pipes skirl for him?
Did his father speak
As he handed him the Thirty three pound ticket?

Was it opportunity?
Was he pushed?

Was the clothing a costume?
A way of being in the world
That didn't require explanation?

A holding
That never lets go?

A package tied up with grief and longing

No women to wail.
No one to witness.

Just movement from one place to another.

For twenty one years
I looked at that package.

He gave me the key to the door
Then died.

No women wailed.
No-one witnessed

Just movement from one state to another.

The singular lament of a daughter
Across the decades

Never knowing
The Good Shepherd

That gave his all
To be.

3. Leaving

November 11, 1926.

A boy not yet shaving.
A small brown suitcase in his hand.
The cold and chaos of Royal Dock Number 14, Port of London.

A ship.
S.S. Bendigo.
His place on the water for the next six weeks.
Berth Number 961. A bed, a peg and his own 15 cubic feet.
Side by side with 900 other travellers.
Vagrants
Vagabonds
Escapees.
Hopefuls.

Bendigo. The gold fields of Victoria.
The place where you could pick up gold in the street.
Is that what Australia would be like?

How does a 15 year old
Make his way in that warm and sunny place
so removed from the grime and grit of Lanark?

S.S.Bendigo built on the Clyde so near his home
Now carrying him away.
Unaccompanied migrant.
Thirty three pounds.
Third Class Steerage to Melbourne Australia
via The Cape of Good Hope.

People, noise, bustle, fear.
Could this be worse than being in the pits?

His dad had farewelled him in Motherwell at dawn.
A quick farewell
To the other side of the earth.

The glory of the railways -
a fitting distraction for a young laddie.
The smell of coal, the hiss of steam
And movement forward
Ever forward.

A train to Glasgow's glorious railways cathedral.
The glass and iron edifice
Celebrating all that the railways meant to the Empire
but most of all to Scotland
and to Glasgow.
The industrial heart of Britain.
How does one leave this majesty?

Silently.

Four hundred miles of steam locomotion.
Eight hours in Scotland's celebrated invention.
Curled up sandwiches and oat cakes for the journey.

Miles and miles of British countryside and industry.
Industry, the thing that made Scotland great.
The Scottish Enlightenment gave the world steel.
Steel gave his family a house in Berryhill Row,
a school and a livelihood.
Engineering.
It's in the blood.
Knowing how things work.

Euston. Night. Dark, dreary, cold.

Someone was calling his name.
The accent was foreign and hard to understand.
People and luggage carts
Bustling through the platforms and corridors.
A horse drawn carriage with some other folk from the train.

A shipping line hostel for the night.

A meal, a rest and then to the ship to catch the next day's tide.

Women, men and children huddled in together.

Waiting to go.

Somewhere.

To the sea.

To the other side of the world.

4. Meeting the Man

So many sentences etched in my mind.

Only a few — he didn't talk much.

'Be quiet, you'll scare the fish.'

Fish were silent.

Water was silent.

We eat the fish, in silence.

Silence was language.

There was air in it.

A wedge.

A fog.

Looks accompanied the silence.

Piercing, biting looks that pierced to the marrow.

Unaccountable and buried in the essence of being.

Words arrived without context, sharp as razors.

'Don't be promiscuous.'

Rejection.

Confusion.

Disengagement.

His smell.

Always the cigarette beneath

The felt hat with a narrow brim.

A lean face and penetrating green eyes.

Beautiful hands.

'Wash your socks in the bath.'

The secret to beautiful hands.

We shared the bath on Saturday night.

Torn telephone book pages stoked the chip heater.

One by one we bathed.

I listened to the big brother's silence.
He breached the silence with The Goons.
He was busy, he was going out.
He had a car.
And was never there.
The beautiful hands dug potatoes
For worms, for the fishing.

'You'll become an alcoholic.'

Every Hogmanay he took a wee dram.
Sometimes more than one.
With one elbow on the mantelpiece, he tenderly sang *My Ain Folk*.
I didn't know what that was.
But I knew it was not here.
Miles of sea lay somewhere inside the song.

The room was cleared for dancing.
Carpets rolled back.
I don't remember him dancing.
At midnight they joined hands and chorused *Auld Lang Syne*.
We'll take a cup of kindness yet...

At dawn he lifted me onto his shoulders and we went home by train.
Another year had gone somewhere I could not see.
He carried me home without speaking.

But he never went home.

The races broke the silence.
Radio calls, followed by swearing
'That Purtell couldn't ride a winner if his life depended on it.'
The pink newspaper
The evening trotting to recoup the losses of the day.

Movies.
He worked as an usher.
I saw every film.
And the matinee.
I got in for free.
He wore a burgundy waistcoat and a bow tie.
Always dapper.

Silent.

Never a smile.
What were movies to him?
Betting tickets.
Many jobs for betting tickets.
Horses endlessly circling the track.
Trotters at night
And the dogs ran and ran and never arrived.
Never a delivery.
Always the scowl.
Many moods over betting.
The house tense and unfathomable.

She didn't speak and neither did he.
Sometimes he would yell for the money.

The felt hat came home for tea.
We eat in silence.
We assemble around the radio.
She knits.
He smokes.
I listen.
Listening in the silence for clues.
What did I do?
It's my fault.

'Who do you think you are?'

An utterance blurted out in the Black Holden
Blurted from under the felt hat.
Silence.
I get out. The black door closes.
I sing 'Timothy's late'. I don't know why.
Mother is happy.
Did he hear?

'He's a pansy.'

The accuracy was hurtful—alarming.
What did he see or hear in the silence?
Fools were dismissed.
Energy was encased in a chrysalis
Articulated when the silence could hold no more.

Sometimes I went to the races with him.
He was beautiful in a dark surge green suit
With the inevitable hat.

At last I had penetrated his world.
He gave me money to gamble
I was honoured to be in his company
To feel the thrill of the race
And the disappointment of the loss.
Another try.
And still the horses endlessly circled the track.
Trotters at night
And the dogs ran and ran and never arrived.
Never a delivery.
Always the scowl.

'Take the car.'

I took the Black Holden and broke the headlight.
Silence
And a scowl.
The scowl turned into cancer.
Five years of surgery and pain
And carrot juice.
The frail, naked body revealing its scars to the sunlight.
No hat, no cigarette.
Just silence.
Painful and unending.

'Put wood in't hole.'

He did close the door.
Twenty-one years of me never meeting the man.
Twenty-one years of silence and atmosphere instead of speech.
Twenty-one years of unknowing.
At fifteen he crossed miles of water—thirty-three pounds to leave the dark and damp
behind.
A leaving that never finished occurring.
He had travelled across the silent sea.
Where was home?
Had he arrived?
What is arrival when you have already gone?

The sea kept its silence.

He never went home.

5. Nan

I'm ushered into the Best Room.
Soft light meets the cyclamen and the maidenhair fern in the bay window.

'A quarter cup of water and a quarter turn each day.'
The puce cyclamen radiates colour in the sombre room.

A crochet squares cover is on the pouffe
And Dulcie's photo is on the piano.
Stern, sepia. Some sort of academic attire.
She stares out to the bay window.
'Come on ducky, we'll start with Christopher Robin.'
Nan always called me ducky, even when I was older.
I always hated it.

Little boy kneels at the foot of his bed...
I loved that song.
I loved the journey
mummy, daddy and nanny
and
'now I remember it
God bless me.'

Nan played beautifully
I never made a mistake
I loved doing it
I loved singing.
It was just something you did.

There were other songs
about Kookaburras and Marjorie Sunbeam
but all of the C. Robin's were my favorite.
They took me to London.
To Nan's home.
She always talked of home
It must be hard leaving home I thought.
Where was that?

Home?

The rest of the time with Nan was silent.
Except for Classical music at breakfast.
Which I also loved.
We didn't have that at my home.
I spent many weeks behind the big green hedge.
My mum worked.
I was given to Nan for the school holidays
And I loved it.

Peace,
Silence.
The hush of something in the air
That I could never fathom.
'Come on ducky, time for a sing.'

Singing was not silence.
It was fun.
I smiled and I loved standing behind Nan's back as she played the piano.

They all thought singing was great.
I supposed they wanted me to be a great singer
Whatever that was.
But I just loved it.

At school, I was the girl chosen to give little thank yous to visitors.
I was chosen to sing in front of the class.
It was just something I did.

I didn't do sums.
And I talked too much.
School was not all that exciting.
But I did like to sing and listen to
Radio of the Air and colour in.

I am a storyteller now.
Christopher Robin is still my favourite.

I've made up stories about witches and unicorns and birds
And I tell them to children at markets.
I've also recorded them so the children can Listen In and colour in if they want.

I have been a singer.
On stage.
Musicals, operetta, theatre restaurants.

But when I grew up
Christopher Robin went away
And it all became too serious.

You have to be famous.
You have to study.
Do the Marchese exercises.

Bollocks!

Just sing.

Singing is the voice
You didn't have.

People noticed you.

Did he hear?