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They Don't Tell You

when you're born
that you're not really
born, not completely,
not all of a piece,
that the rest of you lags
behind, far behind
like the tail of a comet
trailing in ancient history.

Personne ne nous apprend

quand on vient au monde
qu'on ne naît pas vraiment
pas entièrement
qu'on n'est pas intact
qu'une partie de nous traîne
derrière tout au loin
comme la queue d'une comète
dans l'histoire ancienne.

Betwixt

I said my prayers nightly
long ago, in Sandycove,
on my knees
Mother above me
willing me not to be
a sinner

Father below in the water
of the Gentlemen's Only
at the Forty-foot
urging me to dive in
from the rocks through
the air, arms outstretched
as I'd done from the high
branches of a tree
when I fell on my face,
as I still do in nightmares,
dive in close to where
Joyce rose
from his Tower nodding
to the "snot-green sea,
the scrotum-tightening
sea — our mighty mother."

The "Forty-foot" is a celebrated swimming hole among the rocks in Sandycove, at that time, exclusively for men to bathe in naked.

It All

March. “No flies about today,”
quips the conductor, rubbing
red-cold hands as we board
his bus at St. Stephen’s Green,
then catches sight of the woman
in shortish skirt heading straight
for the spiral staircase, and strains
forward to see under it as she mounts,
still rubbing his hands. “Ach,
you’ve no shame in you at all!”
smirks another, winking,
voice congratulatory.

Never done revolving
it all, Mother would not
wink but promptly swat
the first spring fly
before its compound eye
could spot another,
never mind mount it
or be mounted.

It All *was the original title of Footfalls, a Samuel Beckett play.*

An Aching

When I think about loss
it's my father I mourn,
gentle, modest, slow
at the last, pretending
to stop to look
at something

if only I'd been a better
son, a different son
walking hand in hand
then side by side
under brooding clouds
along the shore he loved
or up the Glencullen road
over mountain slopes
the sea slowly coming
into view, at night alive
with lights flashing
and dancing around
Dun Laoghaire harbour

in his presence feeling
a warmth, an aching
I could not voice, feeling
like a man not a man
reared as a child
that died
and did not die.

St. Kevin's Tower, Glendalough

an Irish legend

It rises, hardened ecstasy
amid ancient tombstones leaning
in adoration. Tangled brambles
guard the opening where refugees
once clambered up, pulling
their ladders after them
to the clang of sword on sword
and Viking shouts that shook
the hills. Deep power lives
on in old ruins squatting
in thick greenness.

Here, in a hollow trunk, Kevin hid
from Kathleen's implacable passion
saw lark flames dart about
stained-glass trees shed light
then pushed her into the lake
to become one with virgin clay
and he a saint.

Many have come here to worship,
to learn about sainthood
in the glow that weaves heaven
with earth and earth
with fathomless depths

while Kathleen's moans rise
from the lake, mourning
her love and all the world's
lost love.

But I, no saint, only
the creature your savage loving
made me, could not dodge
yours, Mother.