

H A R R Y C L I F T O N

The Eldest Son

The eldest son sees deepest into the past,
Forever looking backwards, over the shoulders

Of a generation carrying him, on a corridor
Dark and endless, smelling of food and medicine,

Human ordure, with the rooms thrown open—
Hospital, Home. A woman in there at her stove

Is soundlessly weeping. Bebies of aunts and uncles,
Next one down, are sharing an ancient secret—

Shut that bloody door! A brother and sister,
Nakedly playing, before the Age of Reason,

Freeze in horror, guilty of being seen.
And all the unmentionables, the remittance men

From the ends of the earth, the family ghosts
In winding-sheets, take up their beds and walk,

Forever being born, towards redemption.
All the doors are closing, one by one,

And baptism waits, the cruets, water, oil,
The change of state. As if he still might live,

The eldest son, the last to be brought down,
With the others long since gone into the future

And the afterbirth mopped up, the blood and tears,
The delivery ward by now a mausoleum.

Next to Go

i.m. Laurence Cassidy 1951-1997

1

Next to go, Lar Cassidy—
“Events overtook me

Or I would have returned your call.”
A figure in the hall

Of Seventy Merriam Square
Unlocks the wooden double-door

To the State of Literature.
Outside, Siberian tigers roar

To the tune of seven pounds a week
And a roof that leaks.

Inside, “the Soviet ideal”
Otherwise known as the price of a meal.

It is Nineteen Eighty-Two—
I am beckoned through.

2

“Yes, it was a good gig,
The Brian Dunning Benefit Rag

At Killiney Court.
Now for this goddamned report...”

Headscratching. *We agree...*
Harry Clifton, who he?

“Nothing to Yeats, I suppose.”
Nonetheless, *I propose...*

A copy of *Phoenix* magazine,
Cassidy, it would seem,

Carson, Durcan, Cathal O Searcaigh,
A.N. Other, even me,

Each with a half-full glass
As the years pass.

5
Next to go, Lar Cassidy—
“Events overtook me

Or I would have returned your call.”
The blackout, the fall

In office hours, at half-past five,
And waking, to an afterlife

Of borrowed plasma, part-time work,
An Indian summer. Stray remarks—

“I’m back again, on Beckett and Joyce.
I notice circles in my eyes.

Will the French government fall, do you think?”
The drip-feed, the blood-bank

Of books and gossip, supplicants, friends,
Right to the bitter end.

A Gulf Stream Ode

i.m. Laura Allende 1907-1984

To the west of us, like an untold epic,
Huge and silent, written in air and water,
Nutrient salts, cold-walls and foggy banks
Dissolving in each other, threading their ways
Between the islands, Bofin, Inishturk
And the crooked nine-mile fjord of Killary Harbour,
Wittgenstein’s cottage, Ownie King’s post office,

Faherty's, around our summer house,
The Gulf Stream ran through childhood.

High inland

I stopped a minute. For it was lifting,
That eternal mist, that blots out everything
To a distance of ten yards—a mist off the sea
I could conjure out of nowhere, to this very day,
Shrinking the world to microcosm. Waterdrops,
Fern-leaves. Squirming under my boot,
A hook in its gullet, the death-entanglements
Of a Sargasso eel. It was lifting,
And the distances, the space of pure imagining
Beyond the merely great-in-the-particular
Cleared like a depth of field. Away to the west
Were Carney's acres and his lazybeds,
Mullaghglass headland, with its burial-ground
Abutting on nothingness. Faraway no-sound—
Ocean breakers, cresting along their lengths.
And the rest a legend, as yet to be pieced together.

Yes indeed, we were an extraordinary family—
Granny Allende, our maternal ancestor,
Arucanian cheekbones, almost local,
Another life in London, summering here,
Our great enigma. How, I was asking myself
Even then, unfledged at twelve or thirteen—
How had we fetched up here, in this maritime state
Of “warm wet winters, summers cool and damp”,
Our house so filled with pebbles, sea-shells, bird-cries,
Hurricane-lamps that threw gigantic shadows,
Calcified fishes, drifted tropical seeds
Inscrutable with oceanic force
The Gulf Stream brought us? Shadows, Granny Allende—
Even then, I was spooked by my own lost origins.
Not that it mattered here, if anywhere.
Wittgenstein, they said, was a very strange man.
And Slippey Faherty, with a hook for a hand,
Salting, smoking, curing in his shed
Horse-mackerel for the winter, cod and pollack.
Major Plaistow, back from Japanese camps,
Shacked up with a local girl. And Nora Burke
Abandoned by her man, on their wedding-night,
Who farmed the land alone.

In my mind's eye
I could see her down there, swishing her great scythe
Through late July. I could see them all,
Inhabitants of the Gulf Stream, local, small,
Absorbed in their business. Ownie King
With his sheepdrops and his week-old telegrams,
Eavesdropping on Greenland and the late summer run,
The Irminger, the Humboldt, Norway currents,
Awaiting a poacher's moon. Again it would fall,
The north Atlantic mist, the long depression
Stretching to the Arctic. Blow-ins, storms,
Boreal darkness, night-time closing in.
I would deny everything. Whole decades would pass.

Meanwhile though, unkillable in the grass—
Granny Allende, where on earth did you come from?—
An eel was writhing. Instinct told me
Let the thing go. Coldblooded, let it melt
In its own element, an elver-memory,
Pure nacelle, of absolute Otherwhere,
Epic or legend, to get back to once again.

Rabbits at Orly Airport

And the last shall be first, and the first shall be last—
Herbivorous, nibbling at the runway's edge,
The rabbits quivering in our turbo-blast,
The lower forms, across the broken bridge

Of evolution, have us in their sights
And look beyond us, through the fuselage
Of a 747 trembling before flight,
A batman's signals, to their own Golden Age

Of wind and heavenly grass, already achieved.
Their race is over. Patiently they wait
As we lumber towards take-off, to receive us
At the infinite point where both our lines shall meet.