THE STORIES

Ed Larrissy

Argotist Ebooks

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THE STORIES

The Librarian

How melodious he is the spruce young
librarian, as he hums a breezy
tune to the squeaky metronome
of his heels: I know it, he's been
browsing in Nature's holy book
again. From the grain of sand to the
cluster of galaxies spinning
on the meniscus of his morning
coffee, a million scintillations
of scattered waves and leaves
with the symmetry of the tiger – almost,
but never, exact. The tree of life
gives him an ecstatic feeling, and,
on a nice day like this, bustles
with allegory. The world is a ship
that has sailed into calm weather:
he strolls on its sunny decks, and sings,
striped by the dusty dim rays of sun
that searchlight the library's warm gloom
in the rumour of far-off traffic.
How enviable the librarian's secret life.

The Detective

Perhaps you too have gone back
to that placid lowland house
with the same sense of being
a detective unofficially hunting

for clues to a favourite crime
still unsolved – familiar
and distant as a nursery picture,
each detail known by heart,

but the meaning a tedious puzzle.
If so this would be my last
intimacy with you:
to walk as the ghost of your ghost

and peer through the barred gate
at the white walls of the house.
But the walls are simply white,
and the windows simply black.

And the gravel scooped to a baldness
on the drive? And the heap of twigs?
Would these be clues? Nothing –
the thrash of waves of wind

on a beach of leaves, the twitter
of thrushes. I flick a cigarette
to smoke a while on the drive,
as if freedom were there, locked up –

as if you'd creep from the bushes
soon as I've left, and watch
thin blue scarves of smoke
unravel in grey air.

But it's I who return, still
with your eyes, after ten steps.
The smoke has gone. But the same
twittering restlessness

suddenly fills me with boredom
that this should be human – to haunt
my past, not out of passion,
but simply because I must.

Naming her Parts

All these things keep coming at me,
and there's no language for their uniqueness:
each second's distinct but ephemeral
form is a mythical beast,
rampant then vanishing,
but happy in its brief life,
for that is its nature.

So much, for instance, comes
from the springy ringlets
of your hair: loud brass
winding into quiet wood:
music into which my wide look
is woven, like the cough
in the concert-hall.

The new Adam will cover a lot of paper.
And each volume is a new name.

8/11: Upstate New York, August 2001

Was it in Sacandaga
or was it Saratoga,
that time we parked behind the truck
from Quebec,
and read their quiet motto,
'I remember'?

I thought that I remembered
mile on mile of forest
with lakes like little mirrors
never looked at.
But maybe that's in Moidart.
Or is it Mississippi?

No matter – though perhaps
it's a motto for the planet.
In Frankfurt or Llansamlet
I'd say it beats 'I'm winning'.
Go tell the New World Order
'*Ich bin ein Québecois.*'

That night we drank our Buds
in a clearing near the Hudson,
and watched the glowing fireflies,
and the moon, and the tail-lights
of planes bound for Manhattan,
till the sky was left to the stars.

The Old House

It never seemed easy to get to the old house, the way the ancient trees
hung down their leaves, and their shadows filled the gardens.
After climbing the steps you'd let me into the dark hallway with its engravings
of German cities, like the background to a story I could never
understand. That year you were an authority on everything.
I don't mean so much the way that cloud in the window
might presage a period of cold, sunny weather, but rather
the way you knew that, before the year was out, my infatuation
with the chairman would have turned first to suspicion, and then
to concealed hostility. You were like that for some time.
But I noticed by next summer how the epigrams had stopped,
as you stirred your tea too long and gazed at the carpet.

By autumn you had moved to a spry modern apartment
on the main road. I heard that now you were clown and ironist,
sewing shirts on the floor in the lotus position while listening
to Sidney Bechet. You had seen through my pretence,
for I was one who, through insecurity, turned life to stone,
a tableau of grey statues, the more mendacious for its sensitivity
to nuance, and you were my prize victim. Now, years later,
I hear you are the hermit, and I am the one who stuck
with the usual things, stiff with predictability,
as I gaze down at the boy at the bus-stop with his bow and one arrow.

Theory of Being

I'm easily downcast, you know, and wet days
depress me, but sunshine makes me
feel good. So I'm glad the sun this morning
lies in slats along the floor, as it to cry:
'See here, I've brought you up a day
of potential happiness instead of
breakfast in bed.'

The weathers change, and we within them.
A relative stability is ours
however: my room, my music playing.
So inevitable, they say, this melody.
Well, but it's not the only song
he might have sung that then would sound
inevitable.

The sun heats my chance skin,
my passable being, but I don't
feel good any more.

The Stories

I set off for your part of town and wondered if I looked
too obviously like someone from up the road. We were to meet
at a café by the cathedral – 'your' cathedral, we called it. As it happened
the congregation was just beginning to emerge into the sunlight, all hats and smiles,
bearing within them the confirmation of a story which each would carry
into the dark corners of the week, like sunlight itself,
illuminating the cupboard full of forgotten toys, or the cool caves
of glass and carpet where a life is eaten alone. The illumination has to fall
on so many different things, but often its story of renewal
is enlivened by what it addresses, applied to new material,
like some formula of bardic story-telling adapted by a hard-boiled
thriller-writer who had been set a writing task called,
'How I thought I had lost my child in the supermarket car-park.'

The story lives by repetition, and so we reaffirm
the security of its truth, an invisible corset you might say,
but wrongly, for it is more like a closely-fitting leotard. Even so,
the story seems to change over the years. But one day
a snatch of carol heard on the street corner puts you back
in how it used to be, standing with the shepherds and the wise men
looking down on the baby with his open arms. Because you'd got to thinking
that the heart of the matter was the white-bearded spectre
who mutters discouragement at the top of the stairs.

So why did you get up and go? You told me a story
I didn't remember, how we'd been to the fund-raising concert
and walked over Archway bridge to the rambling house under the unhealthy trees,
and sitting up drinking vodka and playing cards,
a three-in-the morning velvet silence followed that seemed
like the prelude to something that would last for five or six years.

And I thought my memory was good. Normally I don't need either journeys
to long-forgotten places, or the taste of forgotten biscuits, I can make the film
run anyhow. But sometimes, in a spirit of thoroughness, I combine both methods:
my own re-telling and the prompting of places. And that's what I did
when stranded in that café by the road junction, I knew that it's all
still there, that it just plays and re-plays itself endlessly
in another world just out of eye-range, like the blind spot
in the wing-mirror of a car. And making it visible and solid, I really think
I could change the way things happened – until I remember
that it's always there, that it was always going to be there.

Belfast, 2008

The street trees make a woodland over your head.
Down on the pavement your gaze follows buses and cars.
But just look up and it's led through the green wood, and thence
to the blue mountain framed by the redbrick shops
at the end of the road.

The trees mean hope: that the urban life
would link to a paradisal glade. Not as an alternative,
but parallel and merging –
part of a wished-for union of city
and garden, where the grid of the streets grows
lush, untidy borders which reach
into the dream time.

If you should take a helicopter to the mountain,
you'll see the blue giant's shoulder looming closer
and closer, until it fills the view, and beyond that
his stone face as he lies on his back and dreams.
He's listening to endless, jabbering voices, like the sound
of a distant radio. And in his dream the voices
never stop. They never, ever stop.

Walking Belfast Lough

You start with a Dickensian scene, a sort of ex-pub, dark-windowed, planted
on a little pier above the mud-flats. The waves curl white
in the flapping wind as the car ferry nudges out of the harbour.
We walk into a wind that chills without hesitation.

Further on, the shoreline gentles to stands of oak and dark Scotch pine,
moulded to the rounded hills, and a trickle of stream fusses
under the ferns by the ruined boat-house. Steps go down
into the water, but no-one will return.

On the horizon are scattered islands, faint blue, and these are really
Scotland. In an hour or so we'll round the corner
of the coast and see the shore of Galloway, a low grey wall
eighteen miles distant, with a house gleaming

like a white postage stamp. The sky darkens and a grey mist
bleaches the vista. Above the harbour wall
the flag of Ulster, bloody red on white, the flag of Scotland, white on blue,
the flag of Israel, blue on white.

Hornsey Rise

On the bridge where you see
the city's distant
winking science-
fiction cliffs,

where tyres unroll
their carpet of hissing,
and lorries make
their buckety shudder,

I wander out
now the clocks go back,
and the yellow lights return
to the municipal staircases

where graffiti look
like sex hieroglyphics
and kids throw cats
down the rubbish-chute.

And the voices never stop --
like that song they sing,
south of the Border
down Mexico way --

till you stand beneath the lamp,
with your back still turned,
ear-rings chiming
where cheek turns chin.

The Broken Greenhouses

The rows of greenhouses were a nursery
for the public gardens, but now they're abandoned.
You can still see the flowers, becoming dishevelled –
the dahlias spiky, the geraniums crinkled,
the rambling nasturtiums replicating leaf
on leaf, like little water-lilies on stilts.
They don't look their best. They need a guiding hand.
They press their faces to the pane
or seek the sun through the shattered roof.

They cannot know that this once-bright world
is now a prison where their formal education
won't do them any good. Little faces –
they want to say, 'I understand
and need the sky', but no-one hears.
A blackbird sits on a watering can
and sings his evening song. The ancient
rituals go on. The shattered sky
is still a kind of sky, is still a kind of sky.

Bethesda, North Wales

Three things of slate in this village:
work, home, and grave:
Golgotha, you called it,
grim, biblical –

the joke was apt enough.
I lived above a graveyard
thick sown with teeth of slate
gleaming a glaze of rain.

Slate dust in skin and lung
the dead from the quarry mountain –
a black half-loaf of slate
sliced by a vicious God.

Dark-suited on a Sunday
in chapels with plain dim windows
they filled the ghost-town streets
with hymns of singing brass.

Brief rays of watery sunlight –
God's grudging smile – a Victorian
engraving for the Bible,
bound with coal black.

And the very air constricts.
You look across to the hills
on the same level, looming.
The clouds absorb the hymns.

Midas

(from Ovid)

Then the god was glad at his foster-father's arrival,
and promised Midas he could pick any wish.
But stupidity was destined with a dolt like that.
What he wished for was this: that whatever he touched
with a part of his body would turn to gold.
Bacchus agreed to this toxic gift,
though sorry that Midas hadn't wished for better.
He set off merrily with his magic gift,
testing his powers by touching things.
He tore a twig from a holm-oak tree.
It turned to gold. He took some earth.
It became a nugget. He gathered corn –
a golden harvest. He held an apple
plucked from a tree – you'd think the Hesperides
had presented it to him. He placed his fingers
on the great door-pillars: they began to shine.
He washed his hands in the clear water.
The flowing stream would have fooled Danaë.

His head could hardly hold his wishes,
thinking of things all turned to gold.
As he exulted, his servants set
a table before him towering with food.
Loaves were not lacking. But let him once touch
the bounty of Ceres, and the bread hardened.
With greedy bites he gnawed at the food,
but it was covered with a crisp yellow surface
where his teeth touched. Water with wine
he mixed, but the molten metal trickled
on his lips.

Dismayed by this affliction,
rich and miserable, he regretted his wealth,
and hated what he wished for an hour ago.
But nothing could relieve him. His throat was burnt
with parching thirst. Punished by gold.

The Mekon

(The Mekon was the tyrannical and deformed ruler of a green-coloured alien race in the Dan Dare comic strip)

Some day I'll go to Venus,
confront his skull jaw
and reptile eyes,

and see how his baby body
bends
under the bulb of his head

as he drifts through the control room
on his hover desk
in the gassy atmosphere.

I'll ask him where Quality's kept
and he'll point to a room with glass walls
where a transparent plastic egg

trails wires to a screen
flicking pictures of Earth:
a room with workers at screens.

The Capitol.
A room with desks and children.
An excellent cheese-burger.

Sacred Cows

First there was Demeter,
who woke you as you lay
in a summer meadow, leaning over you
with her gentle curiosity
and sickly breath.

Then there was Aphrodite,
gazing at you over the hedge
with her damp eyes and long lashes.

Hera was next,
bellowing in the field,
first in the march to the milking shed
where she bellowed again.

But I can't forget Chaos:
one evening she broke away
with her white eye rolling.
You could just see her thrashing around
in the thicket by the stream.
The next day we found her
impaled on the shattered tree
and staring at the sky.

Bad Morning

You've moved the cup to the border, where a round stain
blots into the sports page, a footballer upside-down, disastrous omen.
Beyond your points of hair the sky is a delicate grey wash,
but a sfumato of gun-metal seeps in from the west.

Click. And the giant is up, clumps and flushes in the bathroom.
You seem not to notice, but it's hard to tell.
He waits and listens at the turn of the stairs. I know
he has read your note.

It'll take some interruption to break this acute triangle
and turn it into a gentle curve. But perhaps
we'll be visited by Ironbum playing Father Christmas
with that bottle he intends to drink himself – his joke about his blood.

The Novices

Comfortable to us the sunlight that kisses
the dear walls and the pages' dryness:
our love is as kind and as shapeless as that,

as clear as the bell that calls us,
with so much speech as the call of a bell.
It gentles us awake at night,

it fills the head.
The after-echo buzzes in our ears,
the sunlight flickers on the walls of the skull.

Priest Striptease

Lace-curtain surplice.
Widow-black cassock.
Fascist boots.

Blest transvestite, what
catwalk twirls:
a naughty nun.

But the real priest
is the biggest tease.
Unbutton, Sebastian,

slight white muscles –
except he's game in – look!
boxer shorts!

Early Mass

The altar is laden
like the back of a flower-shop.

The priest and altar-boys hurtle
on like a football team.

But what is this game?
To mutter the fastest?

To mumble words
a prophet shouted?

But now he chants,
cheeks sucked in,

mouth a pure O.
If you shut your eyes

this intricacy sounds
oriental, barbaric.

He bobs like a flunkey,
and cups the wafer of trumps.

But we cannot see his hand.
And it's quite a wager.

Man cannot live by bread alone.
He eats the evidence.

Death of the Saint

The candle of sanctity
gutters. The white,
waxen body fed
an inner light.

Life's blood nourished
the soul. That vampire –
gorged – leaves in haste
for its empyrean feast.

The excluded beasts, hungry,
bay for the moon, howl
for blood, squeal
in death's ebbing blood.

Saved by the sacrifice
of blood, dead souls,
dry-bodied bats, hang
on the black roof of heaven.

The Garden Party

Still laughing, but no less nervous,
we meet at their place and, in a way, like it.
And they like having us, though they still don't know us.

My life is just one shrugging of the shoulders
at what would once be insupportable.
But we really must do our ride to the ruin once more.

I'm a wanderer from the warm south.
I freeze in this latitude. And you in white
a white silk rose in your hair. Bewitching.

I do adore these wind-worn porticoes.
Sun-tanned Corinthian visitors. But won't you
pass through, shake hands with the stable-lad?

I like the way you wear your dollars lightly.
But you're just as tough.
You still disarm me when it comes down to it.

Love Letter

So everything had worked out well in the end.
And so she sat down at her desk,
his flowers filled with the sun.

'The tables turned
but not exactly to their old positions.
And now you pop the question,
having worked your way through the office.
As if I could refuse,
even if I didn't know we've come through,
my black-suited, lantern-jawed lover.'

As the day wore on the mood of renewal wore off.
The sunlight swivelled from the high windows
to the other side.
But the evening was still a confirmation,
as if the future was ambiguous light.

Galactic Diary of an Edwardian Lady

(Stephen Hawking's A Brief History of Time was a best-seller at around the same time as The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady.)

In the beginning was a black bomb
that blew apart. A blinding smoke
kept growing, growing

to a tropical fog, intolerably bright.
From this, white whorls of moonshine mist
distilled, and then distilled

to petal-eddies on a dark pool.
And now they spin in clusters
farther and farther apart

like shining catkins twisted into spools.
All forms, all time, all complexity,
from the first snowdrop to muffins and tea

lay in that round black bomb
and will return there
when the hot afternoon is done.

Peter Pan's Beard

The thunder shelves in neglected corners of the night
and the tired lightning shows me the familiar room
briefly. Everything repeats its grey shape again,
as I repeat my youth – a known quantity, believe me.

Wendy, I'm bored. Always travelling the same route
to the same island, over the khaki and emerald
quilt of Britain, over the moods – all known to me –
of the sea, and over the last hysterical white breakers.

These days I sport a false beard. I call it
Robin Hood's beard, so pert and pointed and manly.
I stroke it meditatively as I watch the girls at the mall,
and sometimes just from wearing it I feel like the very devil.

I've started varying my flight paths. Sometimes Iona,
sometimes Tintagel. Sometimes Robin Hood's Bay.
To be honest I never noticed much before.
Odd that I had to wait till I felt so jaded.

After a while I'll go for the venerable beard,
the full white kind, like Lear, or Father Christmas.
I'll hover like God over the green earth
and the grey ocean, and point my creative fingers.

Choosing my age I'll recover my boyish spirit,
and the funny thing is I'll stop my flying around.
I'm nearly ready to fly off to Ireland and settle there
and play on my pipes in my new home in the west.

The Russians are Wearing Heavy Wooden Overcoats

(Guardian newspaper misprint)

The joints, especially at elbows and shoulders ,
are hard to construct and endure.
At the front is a door handle – brass
in the case of party officials.
And some have carvings on the jambs – cute
stylised Slavonic birds and bushes,
or portraits of Comrade Vladimir Ilich Lenin,
father of the Soviet Union.
A special number is the fur coat, which has
wood shavings glued all over it.
You will wish to creosote your coat.
We sway like galleons in the snow, and greet
each other like lighthouse-keepers, and
with as good a grace as we can.
The boots too are wooden.
Only at nightfall does the clunking, as of
a child's wooden bricks, gradually cease.

The Sweeper of Leaves

I like the sweeper of leaves,
how he seeks the edges of sight,
and what he alights on gathers
to the circle he is building.

You hear his slow steps
and the swift rhythmic brush,
and with brisk and tender touches
he's done.