

Sinéad Barry – 12/09/18

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The first time he noticed me I was reading Lolita on the tram. My tattered boots were resting on the edge of the seat in front of me, toes pointed inwards. He caught a flash of my face as I turned a page impatiently, my brow furrowed deeply: half in concern, half in concentration. It was only out of the corner of his eye that he saw me. He looked down, then back up again, intrigued by this young stranger.

I attempt to imagine a face for this man and the image dissolves.

That night, I dreamt my house transformed into a boat. The red brick appeared especially still in the darkness and the house was kept perfectly intact. From a hanging lampshade in the living room, a blurred line was cast upon the water below. I stepped out through the front door and onto the deck, watching my house mirrored perfectly on the black pool.

Always in dreams there is that sense where you don't remember how exactly you got there, or even where there is. I arrived at the bow and a cloud of anxiety suddenly descended over the picture, which would remain until I moved the boat. That there could be a reason for this didn't occur to me: an oar had appeared on my right and I began to row.

Handle back to me, then down and out (arms straight). Dip the hands so the blade comes right up. Out as far as you can go and then hands back up so the blade can slice finely, grab the water and pull. Switch sides and repeat. Now you're moving.

It was cold, and straggles of hair irritated my eyes, but we were moving and the worry was subsiding. The bow of the boat cut through the water and we glided along the canal together, unvexed by solitude.

The scene began to melt slowly, then quickly, like oil sliding down canvas. Although my feet stood firmly on the wooden deck, and the house still lured behind me, the water was different now. I realised that it was no longer the water of the Liffey's canal, but a wide stretch of the Shannon.

The night was tumbling backwards into a deep red dusk and a line of herons fell onto the horizon as if on command. The brilliant colours of the sky slowly saturated the water beneath, and as I edged closer and closer to the pressure point of waking, I was confronted with a toppling sense of warmth. Falling forwards onto my knees, the bright line of water sliced through my eyes until I thought the whole red world might burst.

Perhaps it did burst, and I, curled and overheated in bed, was just a part of its debris. Or perhaps the scene just dissipated when I stopped concentrating. Either way, there was that mysterious sense of longing and upset that follows a beautiful dream, as if we don't belong in this stubborn world. I was awakened by the vividness of the dream and longed to return to it; a place where I could be an instrument, not a note, no matter how anxiously I performed.

To empty my mind I stepped out of bed for some water.

My glass was held in a loose grip that mapped my wander with splatters of little droplets on the wooden floors until I opened, only slightly, a window in my room to smoke.

The sight of my reflection in the dark window surprised me. I edged closer, examining every freckle, blemish and straggle of baby hair veiling my face. I noticed that my makeup was slightly smudged under my left eye and my lips were painted with the residue of red wine. I hoped it looked sexy in a lost kind of way. I remember wondering if one can look beautiful if nobody sees them.

I never saw much worth in appearing beautiful by myself. Vanity is most dangerous when hidden, indulged, in the home, in dreams, in the image that appears in a shard of glass. And yet, it held strange validations. I focused on the window and tried to look past my reflection, seeing a darkness that made my white face all the more prominent. After throwing the cigarette, I waited by the window and watched until the first hint of dawn touched my skin.

I blinked, took off my clothes, and fell into bed.