

1981

He's mad about poetry, as you know.

Bik McFarlane, IRA Officer Commanding, H-Block, requesting books for Bobby Sands in a message smuggled to the Republican leadership -- March 19, 1981

Someone should write a poem of the tribulations of a hunger striker. I would like to, but how could I finish it?

Sands' H-Block diary -- March 10, 1981

We had that much in common, at least;
Poetry embossed on me by my mother
From early childhood on. She gifted me
Frost's collected at Christmas of seventy-six,
The first volume I could call my own. Yeats
I purchased myself in Harvard Square
soon after.

Almost forty years on both still sit, battered
And dog-eared, between the bookends on my desk.
Nearby on a not-too-distant shelf, *Trinity*.
Another tangent: it started me toward Ireland,
While you memorized whole sections and shouted
Out passages to the comrades on your cell block.

The fall of seventy-eight, a flight across
The Atlantic to England and graduate school.
I had barely found my feet in Yorkshire when,
Within weeks, I took the train from Bradford
To Liverpool and then the overnight ferry
To Belfast amidst hard-drinking soldiers coming
off leave.

I walked the Falls and Shankill that first morning

Straight off the boat, then took the train to Derry,
My breath stolen by Magilligan Strand as we broke
From the tunnel at Downhill. I walked down to
The Bogside as children played near a burned out car,
Past the Free Derry gable and up the hill.

I stopped at a B&B I'd read about and asked
For a room. It was October. They'd closed after
The summer season. It was dusk, in Derry, in
Nineteen seventy-eight. I had neither a clue
Nor a plan. The woman at the door sighed and
Shook her head. "For God's sake, come on in."

And so it went, learning as I stumbled along.
By June of seventy-nine I was working in Belfast,
Keeping my head low, eyes open and nose clean.
Sometimes there was nothing you could do: one night
At the Simon Community a drug-addled homeless youth
Launched himself into a mirror, bloody rivulets

Streaming down his face like Christ on Calvary.
No ambulance would come – even self-inflicted
Violence was a disqualifier – but a RUC armored
Vehicle rumbled up the drive to take him to
The Royal Vic. There was a catch: a Simon staffer
Had to go along, and I drew the short straw.

Huddled in the back with my bleeding charge
And the RUC with their heavy vests and guns,
I remember hoping this was not the night
An RPG from Divis Flats would find us.
Who would explain it to my mother? And how?
'We suffer in their coming and their going.'

That was the worst of it, though the chairs thrown
At the Crescent Centre by the Sandy Row toughs
Put me in arguably greater danger. And then

There was the sheer embarrassment of having my
Coffee bar till rifled by the wee lads of the
Botanic Youth Club, who saw the stupid Yank coming
a mile off.

Still, the craic was good and I stayed while my money
Lasted; then back to the States where I spent a year
Scrimping and saving, plotting my return to the North.
February of nineteen eighty-one -- I'd just turned
Twenty-five, beginning to feel my powers. You were
On the verge of twenty-seven, eight of those years

Spent on the inside. Almost my contemporary,
You'd been on the blanket over three years by then.
More than a tactic, more than a goal, more even
Than a principle, political status – the five demands –
Had become the only reason to go on, and more than
Reason enough to die. *'The best way out is always
through.'*

News of your impending strike broke on the fifth,
Slated to commence March first. Expecting to die,
You were already staring eternity in the eye.
Despair's last gambit: self-immolation, your
Escape hatch an aperture to oblivion:
*'I am standing on the threshold of another
trembling world.'*

I was training through February and March – it was
The Year of the Five Marathons for me – and fumbling
Through my role as best man in my older brother's
Upcoming wedding. You closed February with
Your last morsel -- a bitter orange – and turned to wade
Into the Styx: *'I have broken my poor mother's heart.'*

On March fifth Frank Maguire died; on March ninth,
Your birthday; on the twenty-third they moved you

From your cell to the prison hospital; on the twenty-sixth
You were put forward for Fermanagh/South Tyrone --
A hunger-striker running for Parliament, your
Candidacy a gift *'like a slingstone whirled for
the desperate.'*

On April ninth you won the seat – no nationalist
Wanted your death on his head. The Honorable
Bobby Sands, MP! Cries of *'Bhi An Bua Againn'*
Rang through H-Block; the world, electrified, held its
Breath. Surely, *now*. But she would have none of it:
"A crime is a crime is a crime." On the eighteenth
they gave you Last Rites.

Trapped as you had foreseen and in fact intended,
There was no turning, no doubts, no second thoughts.
And no witness – warder, comrade, friend or foe --
Saw you falter. "Tell the lads to keep their chins up,"
You told Jim Gibney on the thirtieth – now blind,
You had recognized his voice. *'I can hear the curlew
passing overhead.'*

Stateside, wedding over, I set out for New York
On a second-hand bike I'd purchased from a brother
For fifty dollars. No cell phone, no GPS in those days –
Just 'myself alone' with a map and half a plan.
A hug for my mother, then out the door due east
On Route 30 and up Laurel Mountain I went.

Coming down the other side I had a flat tire,
Duly changed. Then I had another and then
One more that very first day. Never too
Mechanically inclined, it took me three flats
To notice the brake calipers were misaligned --
On the tire rubber instead of the wheel rim,

Burning through three times in less than thirty miles.

Having only packed two spare tubes, I walked the bike
To the outskirts of Bedford and bedded down in
A field for the night, thankful no one from home
Was there to witness my ignominious start.
Come dawn I considered a Greyhound, but instead

Found a bike shop with more tires and tubes.
Thereafter, things went well enough, ninety miles a day,
'Til I neared Newark and the pedals refused to turn.
I walked the bike into Newark and spent the night
Under a bush in a city park -- I slept poorly.
Come dawn, on foot, I headed to the Holland Tunnel,
my goal within reach.

I'd given no thought to whether one could in fact
Take a bike, working or no, *through* the Tunnel.
Turned out you couldn't – obvious enough in
Hindsight – and I stood a while flummoxed and,
Yes, *deflated*. Fifteen miles north was the George
Washington Bridge – a full day's walk with my crippled
metal steed.

In some waste land by an overpass near the
Tunnel entrance an old battered Cadillac idled;
In it sat a large caricature of a man who seemed
To have driven his car there straight from the
Set of *Sanford and Son*. Further off another
Car sat, and between the two loped a slim young man

Who seemed to be carrying messages back and
Forth – an acquisition or conveyance appeared to
Be in progress. I watched a little while and then
Took my chance. I walked my bike over to the Caddy
And inquired politely as to whether he'd be open
To throwing my bike in his trunk and taking me
through the tunnel.

Maybe his negotiations were at an impasse
And he was glad of an excuse to break –
Maybe he was just a decent human being.
Maybe he needed the twenty I offered.
Or maybe all three. He looked me over, said
“Why not?” and in five minutes I was through.

Dropped off in lower Manhattan, I walked the bike
Up to East 96th Street and a friend’s apartment.
I’d covered some three hundred and forty miles
In five days, alone. It was May 5th, 1981.
You had traveled further, dying on the sixty-sixth
Day of your fast only a few hours earlier.

In Belfast, tens of thousands lined the streets
Between your parents’ home in Twinbrook and
Milltown; thousands more at the cemetery itself,
But it would be thirty years before I paid my respects
There to you and the others who followed. *‘We know
Their dream; enough to know they dreamed and
are dead.’*

A few days to get my bike fixed, then a flight to
Gatwick and five days cycling around London to first
Cambridge and then up to Bradford. Some time there
With friends and then three more days to Stranraer
And the ferry to Belfast. By then Hughes, McCreesh
And O’Hara had followed you over the side.

I worked through the summer. Children’s holidays,
Volunteer workcamps -- in Derry, in Fermanagh
And Dublin, always circling back to Belfast and the
Center of the vortex as one after another died:
McDonnell, Hurson, Lynch, Doherty, McElwee
And Devine. *‘Now and in time to be... changed,
changed utterly.’*

I rode the bike hard that summer: weekend treks
To the Glens of Antrim and Giant's Causeway,
A train to Derry then around Inishowen,
The Sperrins. I tramped the Mourne and ran a
Marathon from Newtownards along Strangford Lough.
Then, work done, the grand finale: I set out from

Enniskillen, through Fermanagh's loughs, then
Counter-clockwise around Donegal and into
Sligo. *'Under bare Ben Bulbin's head in
Drumcliffe churchyard Yeats is laid.'* Cyclist, pass by!
I stopped all the same. Like Humbert's French in '98,
I slept rough along Killala Bay and proceeded
 'round Mayo and into Galway.

From Galway a train to Dublin, then down through
The Wicklow Mountains to Arklow, where my bike
Gave out one last time. I left it propped against
A closed bike shop with a note that bequeathed it
To anyone inclined or able to fix it, for I was neither.
It seemed like closure and, with funds low once more,
 I turned home.

By the time I left all who would die had done so.
Someone might have told them that ten Irish deaths
Would be unavailing against those whose forbears
Had witnessed so many more. *'He feared the famine
Of 1848 in Ireland would not kill more than a million people,
And that would scarcely be enough to do much good.'*

New volunteers still stepped up to take the place
Of their dead comrades; not because they thought,
If they ever had, that they could move anvil hearts,
But to keep faith with you and the others, brothers
Who had gone before and whose sacrifices could
Only be ratified by more. *'Tell outside that I won't
 be letting anyone down.'*

But for their mothers, that dark heart-logic might
Have them dying still: there was grim courage enough.
But families unwilling to see their sons perish
In a fight already and so clearly lost, one by one
As they slipped into their final comas, pulled them
Off the fast. Ten and no more, ten and done.

A well-played defeat can snatch victory from a
Slow-footed foe, and some would say it was.
But no measure of hindsight clears the waters
For me. Would *you* think the ensuing hand well-played?
Or would you echo Yeats: *'For this Edward
Fitzgerald died/ And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone/
All that delirium of the brave?'*

For this Bobby Sands died? A work in progress,
To be sure. The slow and messy slog of change,
Of making history, goes ever on, a wholly
Different sort of courage called upon and
Exercised by those more subtle and patient –
Though perhaps no less determined – than ever
you could be.

I heard yer man Brownie, your Cage Eleven cohort,
On Capitol Hill back in the nineties. Sharp, incisive,
Even funny – as he must have been when you knew him.
Even The Dark, twenty years on and long estranged,
Conceded in bitter almost-admiration that no one else
Could have done it. And though he seems a little
punch-drunk lately,

You can't but give him credit for the distance travelled,
The lives saved and the dream kept alive, if not
Fulfilled. "All wars have to end sometime, don't they?"
So said the widow of The Troubles' first victim, two
Decades on. Perhaps she was right, perhaps his

Reverse Clausewitz strategy was the only way to go,

And what, God help me, can I say? *'Forgive the way
I have lived indifferent – forgive my timid circumspect
involvement.'* I recall Ortega's lines, translated
By Graves, carried in Bobby Kennedy's wallet,
Quoted by his brother during the Cuban Missile Crisis,
After it had started but before the world knew –

*Bullfight critics ranked in rows
Crowd the enormous plaza full;
But only one is there who knows.
And he's the man who fights the bull.*

Who am I to judge? *'Neither interneer
Nor informer; An inner émigré, grown long-haired
And thoughtful.'* Inter arma silent leges,
But what if the heavens still cry out across
The years and all the blood, the blood spilled
And the blood saved? *'The terrible incubus, history,
riding the present, whispering lies.'*

Yeats! Where is Yeats? Born one hundred and fifty
Years ago this year, they are feting him all over
Ireland. He would have some thoughts on all of this;
He would pass judgment, by god! But which Yeats
Would judge – the mad-for-Maude-Gonne one or the
'Sailing to Byzantium' one? Which is fit magistrate
for this inquiry?

*When I and these are dead
We should be carried to some windy hill
To lie there with uncovered face awhile
That mankind and that leper there may know
Dead faces laugh. King! King! Dead faces laugh.*

Are you laughing, Bobby Sands? And, if so, at whom?
I wonder. *'That is Heaven's part, our part to murmur
Name upon name, as a mother names her child when*

Sleep at last has come on limbs that had run wild.'
Excess of love did surely bewilder you unto the end.
Rest easy, Bobby Sands. I will come to your grave again.

*'Put up what flag you like, it is too late
To save your soul with bunting.'*

Notes

RUC – Royal Ulster Constabulary

RPG – rocket-propelled grenade

'We suffer in their coming and their going.' – Padraig Pearse, 'The Mother'

You'd been on the blanket – In the early 70's paramilitary prisoners, whether on remand or after conviction, had served their sentences under so-called 'Special Category Status' -- effectively prisoners-of-war -- living in dormitory-style huts, wearing their own clothes, organizing their own command structures, holding trainings and seminars, etc. In 1976, however, the British government – as part of its 'criminalization' policy – began to phase out Special Category Status, removing the distinction between paramilitary prisoners and 'ordinary' criminals. Among other things, this meant requiring that paramilitary prisoners wear prison garb, do prison work, etc. Moreover, newly convicted paramilitary prisoners were housed not in the old huts but in newly constructed cell blocks which soon came to be called, after their shape, the 'H-Block'. On September 16, 1976, Ciaran Nugent – the first IRA man to be convicted of a 'terrorist' offense after the cutoff of Special Category Status – was asked for his clothes' size so that he could be fitted with a prison uniform. He replied: "You must be joking me," and told the warders that they would have to "nail it [a prison uniform] to my back." Refusing to wear prison garb, Nugent was placed in a cell without clothes, forcing him to cover himself with a blanket. And so the blanket protest began. By late 1980 there were hundreds of Republican prisoners on the protest (though far from all). As 'non-conforming' prisoners, these men were subject to various disciplinary actions. For instance, since they would not wear clothes, they were confined to their cells 24 hours a day. The confrontation between Republican prisoners and the prison system, speaking euphemistically, continued to 'escalate' over the next three years. Bobby Sands, who had served time previously under Special Category Status, went on the blanket immediately upon his next incarceration in 1977.

the five demands – the campaign for a restoration of Special Category – or 'political' – Status was crystallized into The Five Demands: 1) the right to wear their own clothes, 2) the right to abstain from penal labor, 3) the right to free association, 4) the right to educational and recreational facilities, 5) restoration of remission lost as a result of the protest

'The best way out is always through.' – Robert Frost, 'A Servant to Servants'

'I am standing on the threshold of another trembling world.' – Bobby Sands' prison diary: March 1, 1981

'I have broken my poor mother's heart.' – Bobby Sands' prison diary: March 1, 1981

Frank Maguire – MP for Fermanagh/South Tyrone; his death necessitated the by-election Sands won

'...like a slingstone/Whirled for the desperate' – Seamus Heaney, 'Exposure'

'Bhi An Bua Againn' – Irish for 'victory is ours'

"A crime is a crime is a crime." – Margaret Thatcher, in the immediate aftermath of Sands' election victory, reiterating her opposition to affording the prisoners political status.

'I can hear the curlew passing overhead.' – Bobby Sands' prison diary, March 6, 1981

'We know their dream...' – William B. Yeats, 'Easter 1916'

'Now and in time to be...' – William B. Yeats, 'Easter 1916'

'Under bare Ben Bulbin's head...' – William B. Yeats, 'Under Ben Bulbin'

'I have always felt a certain horror of political economists since I heard one of them say that he feared the famine of 1848 in Ireland would not kill more than a million people, and that would scarcely be enough to do much good.'

Benjamin Howett, Master of Balliol College, Oxford, speaking of Nassua Senior

'Tell outside that I won't be letting anyone down.' – Hunger-striker Francis Hughes to his lawyer Pat Finucane, May 8th, 1981. Hughes died on May 12th.

'For this Edward Fitzgerald died...' – William B. Yeats, 'September 1913'

I saw yer man Brownie... -- 'Brownie' was a pseudonym for Gerry Adams, who had served with Sands in Cage 11 of Long Kesh earlier in the 1970's.

Even The Dark... -- 'The Dark' was the nickname of Brendan Hughes, long-time IRA operative and one-time friend and ally of Gerry Adams who later broke with him over the peace process. Hughes gave a series of interviews to an oral history project at Boston College in 2001/2002. After his death in 2008, the journalist Ed Maloney released edited versions of these interviews in his 2010 book *Voices From the Grave*.

Reverse Clausewitz...-- Carl Von Clausewitz (1780-1831), Prussian general and military theorist. Among his most famous aphorisms: "War is the continuation of politics by other means."

'Forgive the way I have lived indifferent...' – Seamus Heaney, 'Station Island'

Bullfight critics ranked in rows... -- Domingo Ortega, Spanish bullfighter, translated by Robert Graves

'Neither internee nor informer...' – Seamus Heaney, 'Exposure'

Inter arma silent legis -- this Latin phrase, attributed to Cicero, is usually rendered: *In time of war, the law falls silent.*

'The terrible incubus...' – Francis Harvey, 'The Funeral'

When I and these are dead...-- William B. Yeats, *The King's Threshold*. The play tells the tale of a bard who starves himself to death to shame a king who has wronged him.

'That is Heaven's part...' -- William B. Yeats, 'Easter 1916'

And what if excess of love

Bewildered them till they died? – William B. Yeats, 'Easter 1916'

'Put up what flag you like...' – Louis MacNeice, 'Autumn Journal'