1997

From "Across the Water"

Ben Howard
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FROM ACROSS THE WATER
Dublin, 1950

What is more fluid, more yielding than water?
Yet back it comes again, wearing down the rigid
strength that cannot yield to withstand it

—Lao Tzu

Weigh your words. That terse imperative,
So laden with its own significance,
Has stayed behind, its author long since vanished.
What weight it carried in my childhood
I couldn’t say, commingled as it was
With other cautionary admonitions.
Don’t jump off the porch. You’ll break your arches.
Check your facts. Don’t forget to signal.
Now, when I think of it, it brings to mind
The image of the two of us at cribbage,
His pointer not a fatherly pronouncement
But a tender nudge, a mild obiter dictum,
Attendant to his playing of a Queen,
His pegging forward. Fifteen-two, fifteen-
Four, fifteen-six, and a pair is eight,
And a pair is ten. And a Sunday afternoon,
Moving at the tempo of our pegs
Around the bend, our quiet competition.
How could I be other than who I am,
Having as my mentor that exemplar
Of weights and measures, counting out his hand?
Read ’em and weep—or merely tally them
And in the future try a little harder.
Yet in the backwash of a windy Friday,
Replete with showers from the Irish Sea,
I thought of him again—and not in the way
That others saw him—not the Principal
Whose presence, unannounced, could silence children
And bring a sudden pallor to the classroom—
But as the architect and engineer
Who built a stage-set for electric trains,
A plaster landscape, mountainous and stark,
And at the center cut an oval hole
Where he would sit, surveying everything.
Perhaps it's just the layering of the years
Or the vagaries of memory compounding
Amalgams out of disparate events:
Whatever it may be, that fluent force
Has caused me more than once to see my father,
Content within the circles of his trains,
As the emblem of the father he became
In twenty years, his stricken body shrunken,
His hair abruptly white, his plans cut short.
Ringed by relatives and smiling friends,
Who'd made a tacit pact to reassure him
And not divulge the truth of his condition,
He lay confused and charitably betrayed,
His knowledge circumscribed by good intentions.
His only son, it fell to me to sever
The ligaments of that benign deception
And penetrate the folds of his illusion.
Never before or since have I more gravely
Weighed my words or watched their slow descent,
Their import settling darkly as they fell,
As though it were a shadow before a storm
Or water spreading freely over stone.

from *Midcentury*, published March, 1997 by Salmon Publishing Ltd.,
Knockeaven, Cliffs of Moher, Co. Clare, Ireland.