

Even After Everything:

The Sea, Ulysses and Me

Opening yourself to a vast book about which you know almost nothing except that *I think I need this* is a radical act of faith. Like saying yes, like casting off on a voyage. As radical as loving someone. As asking for help. The same talismans apply. *This is where our story begins.*

I first open *Ulysses* in a little shed overlooking the Welsh seaside village of Fairbourne. It is a summer morning in 2021. The where and when of my encounter with *Ulysses* is important, like the private mythology of any significant relationship. I have been invited to Fairbourne for a small family party to celebrate my stepmother's 80th birthday. This sounds simple, and probably should be, but isn't. The freewheeling sadness that I have become used to in the background of my life is descending upon this moment like rooks upon a tree. I have never been here before, and haven't seen my half brother or stepmother since long before the pandemic. My family of origin are not here because we are long estranged. In fact this gathering only exists and I only know these people at all because of an explosive action I took some thirty years ago. It is a hard-to-compute situation to which my response to date has been the rather cowardly one of cultivating distance. Coming here is an abandonment of that flimsy defence.

At the same time I am struggling with my novel. The research on which I depend has been scuppered by the pandemic. Covid-19 seems to have altered creativity itself: I don't know how to accept the psychological and social rewiring it seems to demand, or even if I should

be trying to or resisting. Writing a novel requires a belief in the future; it is an act of hope. My much-loved half brother knew how to get me to come here. *There's a shed you can work in, whenever you want*, he told me. *You don't have to do anything you don't want to do*. This morning, taking him at his word, I scurry off up the steep terraced garden at the first opportunity, and, instead of trying to write, I open *Ulysses*. Faith is confidence that something *is*. Even after everything, I believe a book can save me.

Of course, *Ulysses* is set in a specific place, Dublin, and its immediate surroundings. And place, I find, is just as important to the experience of reading it. Famously the novel occurs over the course of one day 16 June 1904, and the reader too inhabits a present of their own which they bring to the book. *Ulysses* replaces a series of sea voyages from Homer's poem *Odyssey* with this day in Dublin and the sea and the notion of journeying permeate the novel. A full response to *Ulysses* can't ignore the sea, its expression of both time and place. I look up from the page through the tiny window and consider where I am and what this moment holds.

My gaze is drawn to the scatter of white houses and the wide horizon. The place I begin *Ulysses* is also a site of global crisis. It is predicted that within twenty-five years this floodplain upon which Fairbourne sits will be submerged by the rising sea, that sucks far out and then comes spinning in. The site has the unwanted honour of being the first projected casualty of the climate emergency in Britain. Neither British nor Welsh government will commit the resources to bolster the sea defences, and so Fairbourne has been consigned to fate. The people who live here, in the village which has been deemed not worth saving, carry on. On these newly relaxed summer days, they cluster outside the low pebble dashed pub. Strings of pale blue lights slouch over them in the heat. There are ice creams for dogs and a

miniature steam train that chugs along the front. People bare their faces shyly, as in earlier times they would have bared their bodies. I almost expect to see a stripe of pale flesh across nose and cheeks. They look dazzled, perhaps by the fierce light, perhaps by the unfamiliar closeness of others; perhaps by the hard fact of their abandonment.

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Bloom was talking and talking with John Wyse and he quite excited with his dunduckety mudcoloured mug on him and his old plumeyes rolling about.

- *Persecution, says he, all the history of the world is full of it. Perpetuating national hatred among nations.*
- *But do you know what a nation means? Says John Wyse*
- *Yes, says Bloom.*
- *What is it? Says John Wyse.*
- *A nation? Says Bloom. A nation is the same people living in the same place.*
- *By God then, says Ned, laughing, if that's so I'm a nation for I'm living in the same place for the past five years.*

So of course everyone had a laugh at Bloom and says he, trying to muck out of it:

- *Or also living in different places.*
- *That covers my case, says Joe.*
- *What is your nation if I may ask, says the citizen.*
- *Ireland, says Bloom. I was born here. Ireland.*

The citizen said nothing only cleared the spit out of his gullet and, gob, he spat a Red bank oyster out of him right in the corner.

When I moved to the Helensburgh area some fifteen years ago I discovered that WH Auden had lived in the town for two formative years, 1930-1932. No one had really engaged with this period in the poet's life, and even I swithered about how to respond. He was not my 'favourite poet'. Though I recognised the discovery as important, I did not recognise it as the transforming gift that it was. How could a gay man of twenty-four in 1930 speak to my own

situation at that time, which was one of early motherhood, and a devastation of who I thought I was? And yet. It seemed fated somehow. We circled each other for several years, Wystan and I. When finally I reached deeply into his work and his life among the streets I knew, I felt no longer alone. My world expanded, to encompass new connections, to a poet and our shared town. We come to texts and works for a reason. Or we are given them at just the right time. *Ulysses* has been given to me by a friend. I no longer ignore the timeliness of gifts.

In the shed above the condemned village of Fairbourne I do not want to read about healing. The sun, the sea, they are coming to claim us, even as they hypnotise with their beauty. I want to have my shattered-ness reflected back at me. I want to exist in an explosion greater than my own. And this is what *Ulysses* is, a day exploded and each lump of shrapnel followed and examined from many angles. It is an odyssey into the consciousness of Leopold Bloom, prism for exploring notions of belonging, and the shame of not belonging. We learn that he is a Jew, that he suffers both daily micro aggressions and full assaults upon his character and his person. We learn that he lost his son Rudy, soon after birth, and that his father committed suicide. He loves his wife, Molly, deeply and passionately but since the death of their son they have not slept together. We learn that he has a successful daughter Milly. He has been conducting a half-hearted affair by correspondence and he is tortured by longing for sex, most notably when he masturbates at the sight of a young woman flashing her underwear at him. We learn of his guilt and his hubris, his arrogance and his humility. Of his humanity, in short. And we follow him as he tests his sense of himself against a society that views him with suspicion as an outsider.

In Leopold Bloom I find a kindred spirit. I'm the child of a grammar school English northerner and a private school English southerner. I was born in Canada and have lived in

Scotland for almost half my life. I see in Bloom's clumsy attempts to define himself my own confusion. Fairbourne shines cheerfully in the strange light. How vast the sea that heaves at its edge, licking the defences. How vast the sun rippling as if it was love itself hurtling towards us. My father's mother (whom I never met) had a Jewish maiden name, Rayner. I know almost nothing about my ancestry, but it may be that my father was Jewish. Does my lack of knowledge about this add to my instability of self? Some of us, like Bloom, have to pick a home. And what if the home you pick does not concur? I look out at Fairbourne, the sun falling in sad fire. What if I said that Scotland has been the only real home I've known? What if I said, soon the notion of *home* will be meaningless. The sea is coming to take it away. What if I said, I am a wanderer with my only home in language?

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And where are you now? And when?

One month later. Afternoon. Oban. Preparing to board *Kelana*.

What is *Kelana*?

42 feet. 1946. Wooden sloop (defined as a sailboat with a single mast, typically having only one headsail in front of the mast and one mainsail behind the mast). Sails operated manually. GPS and radar the only concessions to modernity. Tiller, not wheel.

And what does her name mean?

Wanderer, in Malay.

This part of this essay is in the form of questions and answers. Why?

Each section of *Ulysses* is written in a different form. A play, vignettes, relatively straight narrative, stream of consciousness, a kind of Socratic questioning. This allows all kinds of background, perspectives, dimensions, modes of speech to be included. It allows Joyce to express multiplicity, variousness, a full experience of consciousness. Breaking out of normal narrative as Joyce does may help me accommodate this overwhelming first experience at sea.

Why *Kelana*?

She is the boat of my imagination.

What is *Kelana* made of?

Dear Polly, Kelana's timbers are as follows:

Keel, stem and ribs - grown oak ie. not steamed to shape but cut from curved branches that match the curve. Very tough and strong.

Planking and interior lockers and doors - mahogany. Very good but not as good as pitch pine. A delight to work with.

Toenail, scuppers and skylight and decks - teak. The most durable timber we have.

Tiller – ash: tough and can tolerate bending and pressure. Used for hammer shafts.

Coach-house roof - pitch pine. Extremely resinous and rot resistant.

Dinghy - larch planking on oak ribs. Larch is a tough softwood and you can get it with no knots for planking boats – Jamie

And how will you reach her?

On the handmade clinker dinghy hauled by the skipper to the water's edge.

Hi Polly, The dinghy is made of larch planks overlapping by ½ in, bevelled at the edges to prevent leaks. The expansion of the wood when immersed serves to help seal the gaps further. A bead of mastic is often laid beneath the overlap. The beauty of the shape is all in the fair line of the planking. Once all the planks are fastened with copper nails and rooves (washers through which the nails are driven then preened over with a hammer like rivets), the moulds are removed to leave a floppy shell into which the oak timbers (frames) are nailed while hot from a steamer, using the same copper rivets. This softens them so they can be bent around the hull shape. The planks themselves seldom need steaming. – Adrian

The dinghy gleams like amber. I crouch like an insect in my oilskins. Adrian rows us the short distance to *Kelana* on her mooring.

Why are you doing this?

Thanks to the kindness of *Kelana*'s owner and skipper Jamie Grant, I am finally doing some research towards my novel. I am assisting in the delivery of *Kelana* from Oban, where she has been racing, to her home in the Gareloch in Helensburgh. We will be sailing down through the sound of Gigha, round the end of the Mull of Kintyre (Scotland's Cape Horn! Jamie says), then north towards the top of Arran and on to the Clyde. The journey will take three days.

What amazes you most about her, that first moment, when you step aboard?

Her cables, wires and ropes. Her standing rigging, her running rigging. The clouds are festooned with her stays, sheets, shrouds. It's like a mind I'm looking into, its bare neurons about to fizz, shimmer, open into thought.

Where do you sleep?

In the fo’c’sle (abbreviation for ‘forecastle’, the forward part of a ship below deck, traditionally where the crew sleep). On *Kelana* this is effectively an upholstered shelf in the bow of the boat, above where the anchor chain is coiled ready. There is very little room, and so I do not bring my copy of *Ulysses* with me; instead at night I listen to the RTÉ dramatic reading of the book on my headphones.

What is the wind direction and force?

The wind is pretty consistently between NW and SW over the whole trip, and around Force 3 or 4, except for the passage between Gigha and Sanda when there is little to no wind and we have to use the engine. Our speed averages around 6 knots but tops 11 knots at one point.

What are your secret thoughts about sailing when you begin this journey?

That I don’t get it and never will. That it’s kind of like snooker – why would you do it? That it is hard work to achieve a moderate walking pace so does not make sense as transport. That I am useless because I cannot retain the new words, the whole world of nautical language. That I will be annoying on a boat. That I will be sick. That I will be cold and wet and miserable and bored. That the entire premise of my novel – that it is set upon the ocean – will prove to be an career-ending error of judgement because I will hate sailing. That I have simply added another incoherent dimension to my life.

What happens to the conditions?

We begin in bright sunshine, and brisk wind, and sail towards Gigha. That night, moored in Gigha, the voices of *Ulysses* envelop me in their own weather. Listening, rather than reading, turns the text into a complicated form of music, that stimulates with its virtuosity, like Bach

perhaps. I can feel it in my brain. My standing rigging, my running rigging. Fizzing, shimmering. The voices bring out the humour, the 'special effects'. It is magical, multifarious and confident.

The second day deteriorates into heavy rain and no wind. Jamie reluctantly turns on the engine and we chug at a slow walking pace along the low sorrowful coast of Mull. On the starboard side, the Paps of Jura in grey are followed by a whisperingly faint shadow of Ireland. Soaked with rain, Jamie and Adrian check the forecast as best they can with intermittent signal, impatient to make progress. The wind is a soft breath, more caused by the friction of our faces through the air than existing independently. Encased in oilskins I am dry, but I am stiff after a night in the fo'c'sle.

Jamie asks me if I am all right, if I am getting what I need. Oh my God yes! I say through the tiny space in my hood.

And what is the part you do not say?

I am untouched by the experience. I am worried at my lack of feeling, one way or the other. Sailing feels, right now, overwhelmingly niche, uncomfortable, irrelevant to real life. Perhaps like reading *Ulysses*?

Is there a change in the weather, internal or external?

The second night, we drop anchor in a tiny deserted cove called Dippen Bay. Mist is falling. It is utterly silent and beautiful. I feel something change then, settling down in my awkward space, out of my wet clothes, placing the headphones over my ears to listen to those voices of

Ireland. To choose a spot and simply stop, to look upon the land from the sea. I rock inside voices, peaceful, unfettered. When we wake the next morning, the wind has returned.

How does the return of the wind affect *Kelana* and her crew?

Energy levels soar. We all, boat included, ready ourselves for speed. Jamie and Adrian are a flurry of activity releasing the sheets securing the sails in one direction, to secure them in the other direction in order to tack into the wind. The boom swings over the cockpit like the blades in the *Pit and the Pendulum*. Fortunately I am just beneath its height. I have not grown accustomed to conforming to an invisible element.

While Jamie and Adrian work the sails, I am needed at the tiller, a demanding job that requires me to brace myself against the side of the cockpit in order to pull with full force. I'm surprised by *Kelana*'s elegance through the water. She slices through the pewter-then-mercury, and the foam that unscrolls, hissing, from her hull.

Ahead, a smear of blue. The wind increases and changes direction – behind us now. Jamie and Adrian confer about what sail arrangement will take best advantage of the wind. Jamie goes up on deck and extracts a metal pole which he attaches to the main mast. To this he attaches the genoa, and he swings the pole out perpendicular to the direction of travel. It pulls the genoa out full and wide on the starboard side. The boom supporting the main sail is secured perpendicular on the port side – and now *Kelana* surges forward like a galleon, two sails bulging. I am at the tiller, and the pull almost sends me overboard. The boat heels so far that the deck is a wall and the starboard gunnels are racing through the foam. I lean with all my force against the tiller, to keep her righted, but what is strange is that even though she is galloping through the water at this impossible angle, she is almost noiseless and completely

stable. Kelana is a mare lifting off effortlessly mid gallop. We find our sweet spot and she settles, slicing happily through the ruffles of the sea, flying past Bute, past Inverkip, coming home.

Does something happen now, that changes everything?

The islands are sliding by, the waves running alongside like children at a wedding chasing the wedding car, then giving up because we are simply flying now and they dive beneath like porpoises and I cannot believe the edifice of this boat, the beating heart of this boat, the way that she does not impose our wishes upon the elements, but simply connects them, bringing together all the riotous invisible forces of the world into a living *yes*. She is *form*, she's a novel, she is *Ulysses*. Our faces sting. I am inside a moment now, where I have longed to be, and everything is pressing forward, forward...

I hand over the tiller to Jamie and move to the stern in wonder. I reach for my phone to take the obligatory photograph (although everything magnificent in this moment is invisible). The phone slips from my grasp and falls overboard. I gasp, horrified, as it's brand new, purchased so I could dutifully document this trip. But then I realise how wonderful it is that I can no longer document anything. I am obliged to feel my place in this multiplicity. This plenty. I say nothing about the loss to Jamie or Adrian. The phone does not belong here and has made its exit quietly. Finally I understand the magic of sailing. 'Not bad,' I say, with Scottish understatement, and we laugh. We round the narrows, and there are Helensburgh and Rhu, bright in the sunshine, the spikes of the masts waving in welcome...

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A week later, a soft gold evening. A little canal boat in London where I go to work. She is tightly moored in a marina, going nowhere, ever; she is my delicious limpid limbo. I lie partially clothed on my bed, the fan on, *Ulysses* closed in my hands. By partially clothed I mean I'm in a T-shirt and underwear. This is my body. To write this without the protection of fiction, to talk about my body in a real way, is shameful. But why? This soft, pale shape is, really, my only home. Without it, there is no other. Famously several pages of *Ulysses* detail Bloom defecating and revelling, man-style, in the languorous experience. We see him attending to his body tenderly in the bath, and later in the book is the scene where Bloom masturbates at the glimpse of a young woman's underwear. Bloom is both enslaved and liberated by his body and he seeks in a long fantasy section to transgress its boundaries, and, presciently, its norms. That section, set in a brothel, sees him transmute into a woman. It seems the She-Bloom is a vehicle for his shame, his need for humiliation, his penance for sins real and inherited.

My boat shudders as the pump-out boat arrives, bumping into the jetty. The dockmasters have come to empty my waste tank. The pump-out boat is a large tender, with a huge hose and a tank into which the rejected contents of my body will be sucked. The waste tank opening is right beside my cabin window. I observe the shadows of Simon's boots as they march across my blind, and pick up the thread of his banter with Steve. I wonder about calling hello, but I like being invisible in this scene. I like listening to Simon's chat, and I like it more in my state of partial dishabille with *Ulysses* freshly closed on my belly. Also I am stunned to be at the end of the book.

The suction engine whirs into life. Simon sings to himself, indifferent to the onslaught of my sewage. No matter how many tanks he has emptied, he always appears delighted to encounter mine. Often we chat while he does this; but not today

I look at my hands, my toes at the end of my untanned legs. When I traced my father many years ago we sat in a restaurant and compared our hands and feet. It is the strangest thing in the world to see one's body mirrored in a stranger's body. *You're my daughter all right*, he said. Perhaps some of my own shame is traceable to that encounter. Abandonment is incomprehensible to a child. When the perpetrator inhabits your body, you cannot escape them or what they have done.

The ghost of Bloom's father, Rudolf, appears to him many times in the novel. Suicide was a crime at that time and so in killing himself he abandoned his family in the most shameful way possible. *Ulysses* shows me that we do not come to terms with these losses. They haunt us, they are woven, living, into the thoughts of every single day. They are carried in the body as shame.

Simon screws the cap back on the tank and the men's voices are lost in the revving of the engine. I am alone again, with the book upon my body. Something has changed in me.

Remembering. Feeling. After *Ulysses* I am less afraid of these things. Is this possible? That a book can make you less afraid?

On the evening of my stepmother, Sandra's, birthday in Fairbourne my brother and his partner cook a beautiful meal which we eat in the garden overlooking the bay. Sandra is an academic, a Shakespeare scholar. She is not effusive by nature. Leading up to this party we

argued about my initial refusal to come; looking at her now I think how cruel it would have been not to. She is so happy. I ask her, 'Have you read *Ulysses*, Sandra?' and her face breaks open in a beautiful smile. 'Do you know, Polly, I have. Just recently in fact! Are you reading it?' and we fall into conversation about the book. Her observations are erudite and multi-layered because she knows all the references. I drink them in. My daughter swans in, her hair in a towel, she is gorgeously bored with everything. So grave and poised and beautiful, whispers Sandra, eyes wet at the realisation that everything is moving forward, forward. The dogs, my brother's and mine, dash about barking and stealing each other's toys. My present to Sandra is a silver picture frame, into which we will put the photograph that my brother is preparing to take now. She gasps when she opens the box. Hard to please with presents, she says, that's right. *Yes*.

Later, in London, I try to articulate the scene to a friend. The light is breathtaking, the evening warm and gentle. How wonderful that we can see the world turning, Sandra says, as the sun sets. We are in a glowing semi-circle, for the camera. This hotch potch of individuals, who've come all this way, feel connected like rigging, powerfully, incomprehensibly. Even after everything, we are smiling, taking everything forward, forward...

I had this sense of... I say to my friend. This feeling that I was...

Family, says my friend. That's family.

Yes.