

## Ben Howard

### 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.

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