

Brave

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"What brings you to Ireland?" they all asked.
The island was as green as the dreams say
Scribbled with meandering stone fences
Holding puffy sheep marked by pastel paint,
All looking like Lucky Charms' marshmallows
Bobbing in the thin milk of morning haze.

"I came for my birthday," I said each time.
I roll, float, or fly away for my day,
My yearly dodge of the long table meal
Where favored friends cancel or arrive late
And the absence of a mate creeps from heart
To stomach for the woozy war with cake.

"Oh happy birthday!" the locals replied.
We value both life and celebration
So we get exalted on our birthdays,
Assigned expiring celebrity
Meaning merely and more that we're still here
And we crave that spotlight on our value.

"Thanks," I said, and their next question followed:
"Are you traveling around the country?"
It is the way of wayward U.S.ers
To use ample time and "do it right,"
See it all via checklists and selfies,
And only later in photos back home.

My answer: "No, I just came to Carlingford."
As the do-it-right crowd waits: for money,
Retirement, companions, plans, the nerve,
And waits and many still wait when they die.
I? "If you can't do it right, do it wrong."
Is my way, and thereby I live it all.

The next thing they asked, "Why Carlingford?"
It's a fishing village of one thousand,
Many whose names, faces, laughs I learned.
They live to laugh and yet they wondered why
I was drawn three thousand miles to be here.
(Perhaps I heard them and chased the music.)

"I found it in a book. It sounded nice."
The stones of the castles, the cobble roads,
The medieval gate, and the stucco homes
Build a bantam sunbeam goldened haven
Dangling its stoney toes in the blue lough
While leaning back on the woolly mountain.

"And you came all this way alone?" they asked.
"Yep," I said. It was how I drew my friends,
How I checked email in the antique shop,
Got free metalsmith work from an artist,
Hung Easter chicks, stoked fires, played with the band,
Climbed the tower, listened to Charlie cry.

Then they all just finally said, "That's brave."

My last sun-spin in this brogue heaven,
After late lunch at the Carlingford Arms,
I misaimed when I pointed towards my inn,
Compelled past shops and gargoyled cottages,
Gently up a lane where abbey ruins
Had been waiting nearly a thousand years
To surprise this lone foreign traveler.
I broke from my breaths of sea breeze and stilled.
There, stood a rock shell of divinity,
Windowless, doorless, roofless, and monkless.
The stacked stone walls still held turrets and soul,
And, when my feet remembered what to do,
The abbey bounds came to hold my soul, too.

I toed a pebble and its bounce echoed
Like memories of that ten-line refrain
Starting at "What brings you to Ireland?"
And ending with wide black eyes and "That's brave."

The pebble's last stumbles mimicked laughter.

The sun sunk into its orangin askance,
And I stood in a kaleidoscope
Of dancing geometric shades and rays
Casting curves, points, and pigeon feather wisps.
I straddled glow and darkness, shuddering
In time with the aviary flutters,
Feeling the sanctuary and command,
The moldering mountain, the water's call,
The yearning of laughter; I felt it all.
Tumbling, crushing boulders of emotion
Send me staggering out to the full light.
I set myself down on the downy lawn
To have the green earth help me share the weight.

I'd come for my birthday, for adventure,
For castles, for Irish bacchanalia.
But what I had actually discovered
In my spongy uninhibited quest
Was heftier than any conceived prize,
And this realization sent me to ground:
I had fallen in love with Carlingford,
As deeply as I'd ever dreamed to love.

They were right in what they said about me.
But maybe incorrect on what brave is.

All in life is us moving towards heartbreak:
Our scheduled adventures, our new puppies,
Even all of our soundest romances
Suffer biology's mortality.
There is no forward without an ending,
There is no Carlingford without leaving.
We can fortify against these grave aches
In a shattering freeze in space or heart,
Or take the trip, and charge right for the pain
Because that's precisely where true love lives—
Within our mad dancing courage to feel.