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THE UNDERTAKING

AUDREY MAGEE

THE COLONY

faber

He handed the easel to the boatman, reaching down the pier wall towards the sea.

Have you got it?

I do, Mr Lloyd.

His brushes and paints were in a mahogany chest wrapped in layers of thick, white plastic. He carried the chest to the edge of the pier.

This one is heavy, he said.

It'll be grand, Mr Lloyd. Pass it down.

He knelt on the concrete and slid the chest down the wall towards the boatman, the white plastic slipping under his fingers.

I can't hold it, he said.

Let it go, Mr Lloyd.

He sat on his heels and watched the boatman tuck the chest and easel under the seat near the prow, binding each to the other with lurid blue string.

Are they secure?

They're grand, Mr Lloyd.

I hope they're secure.

As I said, they're grand.

He stood up and brushed the dust and dirt from his trousers.

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The boatman lifted his arm, offering his hand.
Just yourself then, Mr Lloyd, sir.

Lloyd nodded. He handed his canvas pack to the boatman and stepped cautiously onto the ladder set into the crumbling pier.

Turn around, Mr Lloyd. Your back to me.
He looked down, at the small boat, at the sea. He hesitated.
Stalled.

You'll be grand, Mr Lloyd.
He turned and dropped his right leg to search for the first step beneath him, his hands gripping the rusting metal as his leg dangled, his eyes shut tight, against the possibilities
of catching skin
cutting fingers
blemishing hands
of slipping
on steps
coated in seaweed and slime
of falling
falling into the sea

The step is under you, Mr Lloyd.
I can't find it.
Relax your knee, Mr Lloyd. Reach.
I can't.

You'll be grand.
He dropped his knee and found the step. He paused, gripping still to the ladder.
Only two steps left, Mr Lloyd.
He moved his hands down the ladder, then his legs. He stopped

on the third step. He looked down, at the gap between his feet and the low-lying boat.

It's too far.

Just reach with your leg, Mr Lloyd.
Lloyd shook his head, his body. He looked down again, at his backpack, his easel, his chest of paints bound already to the journey across the sea in a handmade boat. He dropped his right leg, then his left, but clung still to the ladder.

self-portrait I: falling

self-portrait II: drowning

self-portrait III: disappearing

self-portrait IV: under the water

self-portrait V: the disappeared

Let go, Mr Lloyd.

I can't.

You'll be grand.

He crashed into the boat, tipping it to one side, soaking his trousers, his boots and socks, water seeping between his toes as the boatman pumped his right leg against the swirl of sea splashing over the top of the boat, his leg feverish until the currach was again balanced. The boatman bent forward, to rest on his knees. He was panting.

My feet are wet.

You're lucky it's only your feet, Mr Lloyd.
The boatman pointed at the stern.

Go and sit down, Mr Lloyd.

But my feet are wet.
The boatman stilled his breath.

That's boats for you, Mr Lloyd.

Lloyd shuffled towards the back of the boat, hanging from the boatman's callused hands as he turned to sit on a narrow, splintered plank.

I hate wet feet, he said.

He reached his hands towards the boatman.

I'll take my backpack now. Thank you.

The boatman handed him his pack and Lloyd placed it on his knees, away from the water sloshing still about the bottom of the boat.

I won't object if you change your mind, Mr Lloyd. And I'll not charge you. Not all of it, anyway.

I'll carry on as planned, thank you.

It's not common any more. To cross like this.

I'm aware of that.

And it can be a hard crossing.

I've read that.

Harder than anywhere else.

Thank you. I'll be fine.

He closed the buttons of his waxed coat and pulled on his new tweed cap, its green and brown tones blending with the rest of his clothing.

self-portrait: preparing for the sea crossing

He reached down his legs and flicked the beaded water from his trousers, from his socks, from the laces of his boots.

Will you be staying long, Mr Lloyd?

For the summer.

That'll do you.

Lloyd straightened the pack on his lap.

I'm ready, he said.

Grand.

Shouldn't we go?

Soon enough.

How long?

Not long.

But we're missing all the daylight.

The boatman laughed.

It's June, Mr Lloyd.

And?

Plenty of light left in that sky.

What's the forecast?

The boatman looked at the sky.

Calm day, thank God.

But that could change.

It could, Mr Lloyd.

Will it?

Oh, it will, Mr Lloyd.

So we should go now. Before it changes.

Not yet, Mr Lloyd.

Lloyd sighed. He closed his eyes and lifted his face to the sun, surprised by its warmth when he had expected only northern cold, northern rain. He absorbed the heat for some minutes, and opened his eyes again. The boatman was standing as he had been, looking towards land, his body shifting with the rhythm of the water that lapped gently against the pier wall. Lloyd sighed again.

I really think we should go, he said.

Not yet, Mr Lloyd.

I am very keen to get there. To settle in.

It's early yet, Mr Lloyd.

The boatman reached into the inside of his jacket and took out a cigarette. He detached the filter and flicked it into the sea.

A fish might eat that, said Lloyd.

It might.

That's not good for the fish.

The boatman shrugged.

It'll be more careful next time.

Lloyd closed his eyes, but opened them again.

I want to leave, he said.

Not yet, Mr Lloyd.

I have paid you a lot of money, he said.

Indeed you have, Mr Lloyd, and I appreciate it.

And I'd like to go now.

I understand that.

So let's go.

As I said, not yet, Mr Lloyd.

Why ever not? I'm ready.

The boatman drew deeply on the cigarette. Lloyd sighed, blowing through his lips, and poked at the boat, sticking his heels and fingers into the wooden frame coated with canvas and tar.

Did you build it? said Lloyd.

I did.

Did it take long?

It did.

How long?

Long enough.

self-portrait: conversation with the boatman

He pulled a small sketchpad and pencil from a side pocket on his pack. He turned to a blank sheet and began to draw the pier, stubby and inelegant but encrusted with barnacles and seaweed that glistened in the sunshine, the shells and fronds still wet from the morning tide. He drew the rope leading from the pier to the boat and was starting on the frame of the currach when the boatman spoke.

Here he is. The man himself.

Lloyd looked up.

Who?

Francis Gillan.

Who's he?

The boatman tossed the last of his cigarette into the sea. He cupped his hands and blew into his palms, rubbing each into the other.

It's a long way, Mr Lloyd.

And?

I can't row it on my own.

You should have said.

I just did, Mr Lloyd.

Francis dropped from the ladder into the currach, landing lightly on the floor of the boat, his movements barely rippling the water.

Lloyd sighed

balletic
poised
movements unlike mine

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He nodded at Francis.

Hello, he said.

Francis tugged the rope from the ring in the wall.

Dia is Muire dhuit, he said.

The first boatman laughed.

No English from him, he said. Not this morning, anyway.

The boatmen lifted long, skinny sticks, one in each hand.

We'll go now, said the boatman.

Lloyd returned his sketchpad and pencil to their pocket.

At last, he said.

The boatmen dropped the sticks into the water.

Are they oars?

They are indeed, Mr Lloyd.

They have no blades. No paddles.

Some do. Some don't.

Don't you need them?

If we get there, we don't.

The men pushed against the wall and Lloyd gripped the sides
of the boat, digging his fingers into the canvas and tar, into the
coarse fragility of a homemade boat as it headed out into the
Atlantic Ocean, into the strangeness, the unfamiliar
the not

willowed rivers

coxswains' callings

muscled shoulders, tanned skin

sunglasses, caps and counting

not that

the familiar

no

They moved towards the harbour mouth, past small trawlers and
rowing boats with outboard engines. The boatman pointed at
a vessel that was smaller than the trawlers but larger than the
currach.

That's the one that'll bring your bags, he said.

Lloyd nodded.

It's how the other visitors come across.

Are there many visitors?

No.

That's good.

You'd be better off on that boat, Mr Lloyd.

Lloyd closed his eyes, shutting out the boatman. He opened
them again.

I'm happy in this one.

The big one is safer, Mr Lloyd. It has an engine and sails.

I'll be fine.

Right so, Mr Lloyd, sir.

They left the harbour, passing rocks blackened and washed
smooth by waves, gulls resting on the stagnant surface, staring
as they rowed past.

self-portrait: with gulls and rocks

self-portrait: with boatmen, gulls and rocks

How long will it take?

Three, four hours. It depends.

It's ten miles, isn't it?

Nine. That other boat of mine takes a bit more than an hour.

I like this boat. It's closer to the sea.

The boatman pulled on the oars.

It's that all right.

Lloyd leaned to one side and dropped his hand into the sea,
spreading his fingers to harrow the water.

self-portrait: becoming an island man

self-portrait: going native

He wiped his chilled hand over his trousers. He lifted his pack
and laid it behind him.

That's risky, said the boatman.

It'll be fine, said Lloyd.

He leaned against the pack and moved his fingers as though
drawing the boatmen while they rowed

small men

slight men

hips, shoulders, backs

flowing

over anchored legs

Your boat is a different shape to the pictures in my book.

Different boats for different parts, Mr Lloyd.

This one looks deeper.

Deeper boats for deeper waters. The shallow boats are
grand for islands that are close in.

Not this one?

No, too far.

Is it safe?

This boat?

Yes.

The boatman shrugged.

It's a bit late to be asking.

Lloyd laughed.

I suppose it is.

self-portrait: going native with the island men

And do they leak?

They do, Mr Lloyd.

The tar on my garage roof always leaks, he said.

That happens with tar.

Does it happen with this boat?

I patched it recently.

And do they sink?

Oh, they do.

Has this one?

The boatman shook his head, slowly.

Well, we are in it, Mr Lloyd.

Yes, he said. I suppose we are.

He reached behind him and again retrieved his sketchbook and
pencil from his pack. He looked at the sky and began to draw
gulls

swirling and twisting

hovering, banking

across

cloudless blue

island series: view from the boat I

He looked then at the sea