

Fifth Sketch for *Ascent and Descent*

realised live at Hearsay Festival, Kilfinane, Ireland, November 2014



Text, concept, direction, production: Ed Baxter.

Music: Peter Lanceley and Ed Baxter.

Narrator: Willy Carr.

Singer: Peter Lanceley.

Musicians: Peter Lanceley (electric guitar, effects), Ed Baxter (electric guitar, mobile phone).

Live sound effects: Sarah Nicol.

Mixdown: Darren at Big Bear Sound, Paul Richardson.

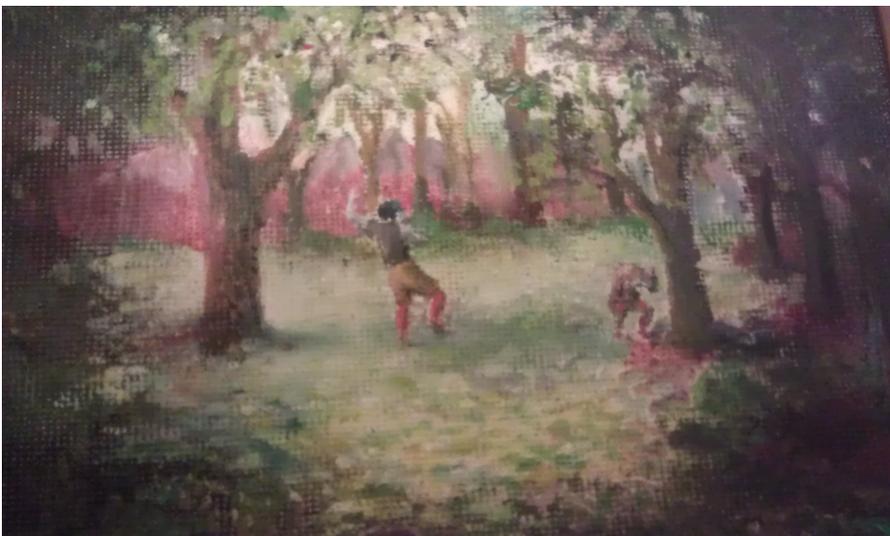
Note: the score contains a quotation from a line of Kyle Gann's *Ghost Town*, played incompetently on the piano by Ed Baxter. Thanks to Grey Heron Media and Donie O'Sullivan for the loan of musical instruments.

PART 1

MAN:

The curse of it... The curse of it is... gravity. Isaac Newton knew nothing – *nothing!* - of life in the desert, even less of nomadic customs, so how could he be expected to understand angels, especially in an era before the Royal Mail had brought his homeland into something resembling a coherent whole? But gravity, there the old boy was surely on the button.

He sat in the orchard that day, thinking of William Tell and how he'd thrown apples at his son all



evening, in the orchard, at his no good son; and of Little John, the man of stone, log rolling with Robin Hood in the vast wildernesses of Appalachia. Wrestling him like a gorilla, a real Monroe he was, iron to the core. And

Newton thought of the garden; and he bent down to pick up some fruit; and a trapped nerve nearly left us with nothing but the stuff on the angels.

Now, Adam Clarke thought it was the form of an *Ape*, not a Serpent, that Satan assumed in the Garden of Eden. And Charles Fort thought, with a touch of the HP Lovecrafts, that fossil records showed apes to be descended from *men*.

Newton picking up a pin... William Tell in an orchard, throwing apples at his no good son... The image of Little John's grave on the rubber on sale in the church in High Peak – I'll come back to

these if I'm given enough time. (And the toast! Will you ever forget the toast, as long as you live - the toast?...)

But you asked for a story. And the story is - round here - that some while ago a nun disappeared from a nearby convent, never to be seen again: except by strangers, late at night, or at least at dusk when her black habit could be distinguished from the impenetrable night that rolls in from the valley below. Some spiritual malaise had gripped the poor woman and so she threw herself down a well. Or, others said, she was drowned like a cat by a spurned but secret lover. Or, heard to sigh by the ever-vigilant Almighty as she stood by an empty country road, thinking of all the time that had passed and of the trees and of the inexorable rolling of the earth, she was struck by lightning - and this perfunctory judgement of God extinguished her entirely, leaving nothing but a tiny pile of ashes you could've fit inside a matchbox had you taken out your Chinese baby first.

Whatever the facts that inform the front end of the story, the freight of rumour and misty myth in the rear carried her tale into folklore; and sure enough her shadow was seen on many a moonlit

wall; her heavy footsteps heard in graveyards and even on pub staircases where no nun had a right to be treading; and the rhythm of her rosary felt like the scythe of Death himself as he ranged across the county on nights when black clouds enveloped the hills and black stallions ran riot; and the dogs, large and small alike, curled up and

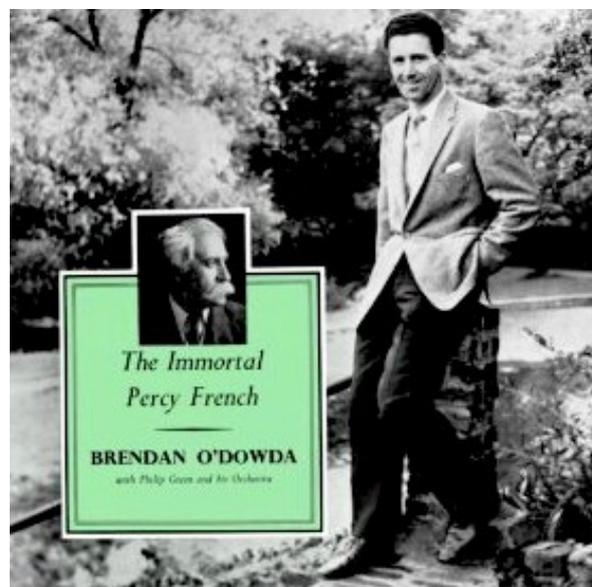


whimpered at the booming wind that raged then at the window; and the radio sputtered and stammered and seemed to be waiting on the terrible payload of Death Notices that the empty hours before morning promised to the still dreaming town.

All this happened in the past, you understand, at a time when all cohered. The world was but an apple, sitting on the head of God. And no one, not even Loki, far less Little John, was aiming to knock it off His noggin.

All of it happened in the past. Back then too there was a boy, a boy who could blow a whistle while he was standing on his head. Name of Bob, or Robert (but never Rob)... or Bobby. Not from round here. No, this Bobby was a creature of light - not exactly emerging from outer space, but at least from the other side of the infinite Atlantic and some distance away from the darkness that hung then hereabouts. Now encounters with such a creature were even rarer than encounters with the ghostly nun, but on nights when the low lying mist stood still at the base of the mountains, silently standing like an invading army that awaits the dawn; and on days when it wasn't really raining, just a passing drop or two, not enough to distract you from the sunlight - on days when you could feel the neutrinos passing through you and passing into the next fellow and ricocheting off the walls of the Picture House – on such days his face would appear. And sometimes you'd even see the whole of him (not just the face) as he flew overhead: flew unaware of gravity, apes, angels, apples, armies, iron, landlords, logs, babies, clouds, giants, hillsides - of the immortal Percy French, of the crow in the field, and of the inexorable rolling of the earth in the still shapeless universe.

All of this happened in the past. In the past...



The Past.

The Past. The Past. The Past. The Past. The Past.

The Past.

The Past. The Past.

The Past. The Past. The Past. The Past. The Past. The Past. The Past. The Past.

The Past.

The Past.

The Past.

The Past.

The Past. The Past. The Past. The Past. The Past. The Past. The Past. The Past. The Past. The Past.

The Past. The Past. The Past. The Past. The Past. The Past.

Well, as to the past, as I think I probably said, or implied at least, what seems formless now, had form. What seems incoherent and even pointless to us all, unfolded then with the force of necessity. What appears rotten and flabby and stinks of sour decay - was green and young and firm as Peter Pan's windpipe. But all this, all this was resolved for a moment, that morning, when we stood by Little John's Grave. I put a coin into the parking metre left there in the graveyard for donations. We



walked into the church, a still and solemn church with a tidy graveyard entered through a wide wooden gate after a steep climb, steep if you're pushing a pram. Inside they were selling

souvenirs. I bought a bright pink rubber (there were no pencils) on which was printed an image of

the grave of Little John: a soft thing, soon worn away, to embody the enduring monument which marked the mythical incarnation of the stone man, the timeless giant who arose from the mountain.



But you've come expecting narrative rather than digression. So narrative you must have... It was one of those nights I mentioned earlier, dark it was. And the rain had been falling for so long that the background hum of it ceased to be at all noticed, so all felt silent as the grave of a blameless infant or a resting giant. The moon's bare

bum shone through the massy clouds, like the flesh of your lover on a fresh pillow it was; and the numberless stars were scattered like ants fleeing a flooded flour mill. And I was there – me myself I – as if in a dream or a low budget film, so seamlessly strange was the uncanny time, so full of space the streets, so vast the canopy of the night sky, so distant the length of time from the here and now. And there, as I huddled in the wind and hid my face from the rain as I hurried on my way home, a dark figure – dressed all in black, as if enrobed in the habits of the newly deceased - appeared from an alley or a doorway, and darted down the shining street.

Startled, I followed in pursuit! Up Main Street Lower, right into Laught Street, across the Mill Road/Mill Hill crossing and along Treada Na Ri; right again, back towards Mill Hill, left and left



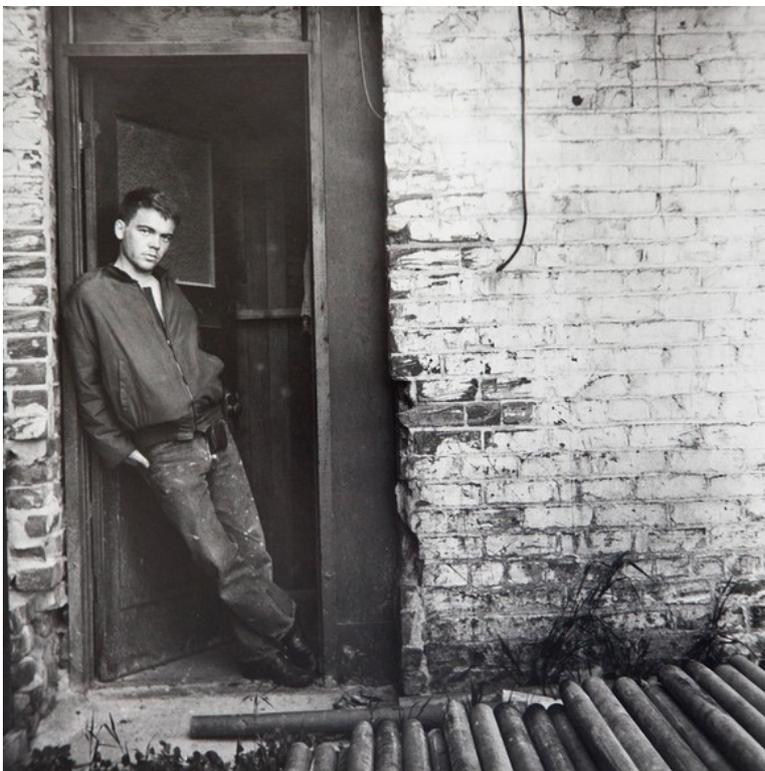
again into Straid Na Faitche. I chased her along the R517, past Mr Kebab, past old Doherty's House, down past the Ballyhoura

Development, Murphy's Service Station on the right and Michael Hayes Interiors on the left... Then, finding myself at the edge of the village where Murrin's Cross appears, just as the road enters

something resembling a fairly straight run, at length I gained some ground. And now at last I caught up with the fugitive figure, which seemed – under the moon now full as a bucket of mistcalf milk - to pause for an instant as if on a half perceived precipice, trembling. Breathless, panting in my sudden triumph, I grabbed her by the black shoulders, spun her round, ready to shake her, to kick her shiny nun's shins, even to slap her sappy soft face.

But Jiminny Cricket, if it wasn't Bobby himself! A bit older now, not much, but still his skin was creased with laughter lines or the lines left by a long-term grimace, like a sailor whose face is fixed by a wayward boom in a fatal storm. Bobby - dressed in black habit, pouting defiantly, for a second a smouldering vamp... the next moment he fells me with a head butt.

And my being in slow motion explodes in a million tiny dwindling lights. And the universe unrolls like the rug containing Cleopatra herself. And the darkness of MacDonald descends on the end of



this Act - but there's no applause because the narrative is so obviously only half way done. Obviously. And how the old nose swells and how it rages inside my sore head.

Fade to a deeper black. Wakes to gibberish. "*A confusion of lemons, incoherence is their want...*" - "I for one welcome the machine overlords and look forward to them making me

money..." - "*Aloof, I alone was known in the land of lost limbs...*" - "Served on a silver platter, like John I was tossed in the trash..."

PART 2



LAD:

Core of ore

Orchard calm

Herd to hold

Hard to harm

Lay them out on an iron barn door

Corn alert

Crows alarm

Torn apart

Mortal charm

Lay them out on an iron barn door

Lay them out on the iron barn door

PART 3

MAN:

Well, the story is - round here - that some while ago this local lad fell foul of the unfairness of those times, when a man had to slave for his supper and sing if he wanted to take a break to go to the bathroom; and the bathroom itself was nothing to write home about, even if you had somehow learned to write more than the cross that was demanded by the person in charge - who at that time was less a man than a kind of *ogre* - a big ugly fellow he was, who sat in his chair and sucked the blood from the people and ate the very marrow of the land to satisfy his bottomless appetite, and lifted a buttock now and then to express his fleeting satisfaction.

The lad doesn't take to this situation and soon there's ill feeling hereabouts and over all the county, which sooner still takes a turn for the worse. And dark days ensue, with much grinding of teeth on either side, and only the crows are truly happy. And the town grows restless and divided and there's nothing, it seems, will bring peace back to the mountain.

Things come to a head one Friday morning. Accused of a heinous crime which, even if he's guilty, merits universal praise instead of punishment, the young man is tried and judged and torn apart. And the bits of his body are buried in different parts of the world. His head they send to the North Pole, where it is buried in the icy wastes where even the starving polar bears can't find it. The left foot ends up in Shackleton's hut in Antarctica, the right in a sunken ship off Tuvalu, out there in the warm Pacific. One leg is buried in Bolivia, the other in North Korea. The several joints of his fingers (there are twenty nine, he lost one in an accident) are buried in lots of places you've never been to - like Milan or Kiev or Hartlepool, say. His private parts are cast into an abandoned tin mine along the coast from Porthleven. His torso ends up in the Azores. His heart is carried away by a fair maiden and she digs a hole in a field not far from here to house it.

The executioners – the *killers* meantime – there are five of them - each meet with a terrible aerial fate.

“A” plunges to her death from a hot air balloon into the sulphurous maw of Mount Etna – the terrible effects of fatally poisonous gas are mitigated only by the action of molten lava on the hopelessly fragile human organism. Four left.

“B” is sucked into the whirring propellers of an enormous cargo plane, which taxi-ing along the runway in a remote part of Papua New Guinea swerves suddenly – and as if by magic, the sad sack of wet organs is reduced in the blink of an eye to a series of mere bloody puddles which soon dry up in the summer sun. Three to go.

“C” takes a trip on a rocket to a distant planet, he's one of the fabulously wealthy tourists whose appetite for adventure knows no bounds. The airlock malfunctions and he is catapulted in his shiny white spacesuit into infinite blackness, freezing to death after agonising minutes in which his removal from everything human turns his brain to mush - after a final all too brief epiphany of his smallness, his meanness, his complete and utter insignificance in the grand scheme of things as well as in his tawdry private life. Nearly done now.

“D” is hit in the eye by a child's kite, his daughter's, as they play on the beach in a torpid seaside resort. The dowel rod penetrates his brain and he dies writhing in exquisite agony and howling like a speared hog, the traces of his anguish in the sand forming wondrous abstract patterns reminiscent of the best examples of late twentieth century performance art. Four down.

And “E,” the last of what you will agree is a bad lot, is persuaded by a rogue wing of an apparently supine government agency to join a fanatical terrorist cell, whose evangelical mission is to be

advanced by the destruction of a universally recognisable public monument using a hijacked passenger jet. On the eve of the sect's selected Doomsday, "E" is chosen by lot to pilot the plane. The last we see of him, his eyes are wide open in a silent scream as the airliner packed with hapless, hysterical tourists ploughs straight into the Great Pyramid of Cheops in the Valley of the Kings, utterly engulfed in titanic phosphorescent flames that can be seen from outer space. That's the lot.



Where the boy's body parts are buried, from each little grave a beam of light shoots up into the sky, lighting up the earth and looking like nothing so much as a gigantic pin cushion in the cosmos. By a process of elimination, sorting these beams from the numerous stars and ignoring all those numberless neutrinos, we can put the pieces back together and – from this distance – make an approximation as to what he looked like, this lost lad. And on days when the sun streams through the blinds, if you look out over the valley, amidst the fall out from the Atomic Era and in the cracks between the clouds and in those tears in the space-time-continuum you hear so much about these days – on such days, you can catch a glimpse of his once faded features.

PART 4

MAN:

A man, a huge man on the landing, stands outside my neighbour's door.

“Sarah, Sarah - it's Anthony.” (You understand, it all happened in the past.)

“Sarah? It's Anthony.”

He bites hard on his fist, places his fist against his forehead, he ruminates. He leans towards the silent door, into the silent door. He says: *“Sarah. Sarah. Sarah. It's me, it's Anthony.”*

The light in the stairwell stays on a minute or two more. You close your door, you see him unseen underneath you, his head pressed against the door, in the dark, saying, *“Sarah, Sarah, please, it's Anthony.”*



ENDS