

The Kindness of the Eel

Ben Ray

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*“I think you can’t really reflect life’s broad scope
without the documentation, without the human
evidence. The picture will not be complete.”*
– Svetlana Alexievich

The Thoughts of Charles Byrne

The skeleton of 'the Irish giant' Charles Byrne (1761-1783) is displayed, against his will, at the Hunterian Museum, London.

when the sun went down and darkness crept in, slick as an afterthought
and I fell off the tongue of God like the last line of the sacrament
I said to George, I told him, don't let them take me, my earthly carriage
is my own – bury me within the water, I beg you, don't let them touch
(We gath. arnd his deathbd quickly, nay, I am nt ashmd to say, eagrlly)

Dr. Mawton of Chelsea

Lord, I know I was mean once: as a child I killed a dog that came close
dropped the stone from my height like a judgement, and then – yes
the nails digging into palms, bent double to allow Pa's beating
*(The subject is 7ft. 7in. tall, this remarkable condition brought on
by some abnormality – evidence of pituitary tumour at base of skull)*

medical report, 1909

was it this, George, tell me what is the reason I have stood to attention
for all this taut time, wires binding my chafing limbs – was it the drink
surely it cannot be His Will that my crown's closeness to the heavens
keeps me from the sleeping earth He calls the remaining world to
*(His grand Height originating, it is heard from certain Reliable Quarters
from his being conceived on the Top of an exceedingly tall Haystack)*

The Herald Newspaper, 1782

why do I remember the dirt between the seat-crammed rows
the applause as I danced for unknown eager faces behind lights
crowds as I lit my pipe off the lamp lights on Cowgate Bridge, all those
catcalls and handclaps which gave relieved thanks they were not me
where was that place, George, tell me – sometimes I forget, where am I
*(We saw him drink from a teapot, it was right frightful to watch
Mama told me he would eat us if we did not go to bed when told)*

Sarah Price, audience member

I once knew Elspeth at the Royal, arms broad from too many days' work
a chest that beckoned you in, eyes that could swallow a week's savings

I'll have another round, Elspeth, and one for yourself
*(And 1 shilling for the driver, and 10 shillings for the law
to avert its omniscient gaze and to get the object away to safety)*

John Hunter, surgeon

I was stripped – a shocking act, my self stolen and boiled from my bones
where am I, George, I am not home, I can tell; no, not gone yet
*(The specimen is a wonder to behold, with a normal man placed beside
in order to accentuate the medical event for all of us to see)*

Richard Gables, medical student

oh, I have been held still for longer than I breathed this very air
I am tired, George, so tired, just let me kneel
lie down on the seabed's blessed floor

*Meditation on Three 15th Century Wooden Barrels
Found Within a Shipwreck in Gdansk harbour*

To him they carry the vain dream of another morning
but in truth they contain copper ingot, meant for coins
to rival the silver cobs belched into Europe
from the unimaginable Potosí. These objects
have travelled further than he ever will, Lübeck to Oslo
to Madrid to London in a cobweb of pathways
sketched by minds a thousand miles away onto the ocean
that pumps life into the markets of the world
and that pushes the present into the future.
It does not occur to him if this is all worth dying for: instead
his coldness ebbs away and he has, all of a sudden
a sense of melancholy –
of the sort that one sometimes feels
when grey light falls on grey surfaces