

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION vii

PART ONE

<i>For to End Yet Again</i> Samuel Beckett	3
--	---

PART TWO

<i>The Man-Keeper</i> , Tom Mac Intyre	9
<i>The Talking Trees</i> , Sean O'Faolain	14
from <i>The Killeen</i> , Mary Leland	29
from <i>A Curious Street</i> , Desmond Hogan	36
from <i>Black List, Section H</i> , Francis Stuart	44
from <i>The Christmas Tree</i> , Jennifer Johnston	57

PART THREE

<i>High Ground</i> , John McGahern	67
<i>Postcards</i> , Bridget O'Connor	79
<i>A Woman's Hair</i> , Bryan MacMahon	83
from <i>Balcony of Europe</i> , Aidan Higgins	91
<i>Happiness</i> , Mary Lavin	95
<i>Blood and Water</i> , Éilís Ní Dhuibhne	113
<i>Ojus</i> , Shane Connaughton	126
from <i>The Butcher Boy</i> , Patrick McCabe	142
<i>Villa Marta</i> , Clare Boylan	152
from <i>Burning Your Own</i> , Glenn Patterson	161
<i>Cancer</i> , Eugene McCabe	171

PART FOUR

<i>The Ballroom of Romance</i> , William Trevor	187
from <i>Good Behaviour</i> , Molly Keane	209
<i>Last Rites</i> , Neil Jordan	216
<i>Between Two Shores</i> , Bernard MacLaverty	226
<i>Heaven</i> , Mary Beckett	240

CONTENTS

<i>Memory and Desire</i> , Val Mulhern	250
<i>The Husband</i> , Mary Dorsey	265
<i>What a Sky</i> , Edna O'Brien	282

PART FIVE

from <i>The Snapper</i> , Roddy Doyle	295
<i>Oranges from Spain</i> , David Park	303
<i>If Angels had Wings</i> , Eoin McNamee	319
from <i>Proxopera</i> , Benedict Kiely	325
<i>Orange Horses</i> , Maeve Kelly	334
from <i>The Journey Home</i> , Dermot Bolger	348
from <i>The Heather Blazing</i> , Colm Tóibín	357
<i>Mothers Were All the Same</i> , Joseph O'Connor	373
<i>The Sky's Gone Out</i> , Sara Berkeley	387
from <i>Ripley Bogle</i> , Robert McLiam Wilson	398
from <i>Surrogate City</i> , Hugo Hamilton	405
<i>A Rock-'n'-Roll Death</i> , Michael O'Loughlin	418
from <i>Remembering Light and Stone</i> , Deirdre Madden	425
from <i>The Engine of Owl-Light</i> , Sebastian Barry	432
<i>The Sight</i> , Brian Moore	442
<i>Incident on the El Camino Real</i> , Aidan Mathews	463

PART SIX

<i>Men and Angels</i> , Anne Enright	481
<i>Counterpoints</i> , Gerardine Meaney	490
<i>The Hairdresser</i> , Leland Bardwell	496
from <i>Mefisto</i> , John Banville	504

PART SEVEN

<i>The Death of Matti Bonner</i> , Dermot Healy	511
<i>Absent Children</i> , John MacKenna	520
<i>Divided Attention</i> , Mary Morrissy	524
<i>Through the Field</i> , Colum McCann	534

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES	547
--------------------	-----

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	557
------------------	-----

PART

ONE

SAMUEL BECKETT

For to End Yet Again

FOR TO end yet again skull alone in a dark place pent bowed on a board to begin. Long thus to begin till the place fades followed by the board long after. For to end yet again skull alone in the dark the void no neck no face just the box last place of all in the dark the void. Place of remains where once used to gleam in the dark on and off used to glimmer a remain. Remains of the days of the light of day never light so faint as theirs so pale. Thus then the skull makes to glimmer again in lieu of going out. There in the end all at once or by degrees there dawns and magic lingers a leaden dawn. By degrees less dark till final grey or all at once as if switched on grey sand as far as eye can see beneath grey cloudless sky same grey. Skull last place of all black void within without till all at once or by degrees this leaden dawn at last checked no sooner dawned. Grey cloudless sky grey sand as far as eye can see long desert to begin. Sand pale as dust ah but dust indeed deep to engulf the haughtiest monuments which too it once was here and there. There in the end same grey invisible to any other eye stark erect amidst his ruins the expelled. Same grey all that little body from head to feet sunk ankle deep were it not for the eyes last bright of all. The arms still cleave to the trunk and to each other the legs made for flight. Grey cloudless sky ocean of dust not a ripple mock confines verge upon verge hell air not a breath. Mingling with the dust slowly sinking some almost fully sunk the ruins of the refuge. First change of all in the end a fragment comes away and falls. With slow fall for so dense a body it lights like cork on water and scarce breaks

the surface. Thus then the skull last place of all makes to glimmer again in lieu of going out. Grey cloudless sky verge upon verge grey timeless air of those nor for God nor for his enemies. There again in the end way amidst the verges a light in the grey two white dwarfs. Long at first mere whiteness from afar they toil step by step through the grey dust linked by a litter same white seen from above in the grey air. Slowly it sweeps the dust so bowed the backs and long the arms compared with the legs and deep sunk the feet. Bleached as one same wilderness they are so alike the eye cannot tell them apart. They carry face to face and relay each other often so that turn about they backward lead the way. His who follows who knows to shape the course much as the coxswain with light touch the skiff. Let him veer to the north or other cardinal point and promptly the other by as much to the antipode. Let one stop short and the other about this pivot slew the litter through a semicircle and thereon the roles are reversed. Bone white of the sheet seen from above and the shafts fore and aft and the dwarfs to the crowns of their massy skulls. From time to time impelled as one they let fall the litter then again as one take it up again without having to stoop. It is the dung litter of laughable memory with shafts twice as long as the couch. Swelling the sheet now fore now aft as permutations list a pillow marks the place of the head. At the end of the arms the four hands open as one and the litter so close to the dust already settles without a sound. Monstrous extremities including skulls stunted legs and trunks monstrous arms stunted faces. In the end the feet as one lift clear the left forward backward the right and the amble resumes. Grey dust as far as eye can see beneath grey cloudless sky and there all at once or by degrees this whiteness to decipher. Yet to imagine if he can see it the last expelled amidst his ruins if he can ever see it and seeing believe his eyes. Between him and it bird's-eye view the space grows no less but has only even now appeared last desert to be crossed. Little body last stage of all stark erect still amidst his ruins all silent and marble still. First change of

all a fragment comes away from mother ruin and with slow fall scarce stirs the dust. Dust having engulfed so much it can engulf no more and woe the little on the surface still. Or mere digestive torpor as once the boas which past with one last gulp clean sweep at last. Dwarfs distant whiteness sprung from nowhere motionless afar in the grey air where dust alone possible. Wilderness and carriage immemorial as one they advance as one retreat hither thither halt move on again. He facing forward will sometimes halt and hoist as best he can his head as if to scan the void and who knows alter course. Then on so soft the eye does not see them go driftless with heads sunk and lidded eyes. Long lifted to the horizontal faces closer and closer strain as it will the eye achieves no more than two tiny oval blanks. Atop the cyclopean dome rising sheer from jut of brow yearns white to the grey sky the bump of habitativity or love of home. Last change of all in the end the expelled falls headlong down and lies back to sky full little stretch amidst the ruins. Feet centre body radius falls unbending as a statue falls faster and faster the space of a quadrant. Eagle the eye that shall discern him now mingled with the ruins mingling with the dust beneath a sky forsaken of its scavengers. Breath has not left him though soundless still and exhaling scarce ruffles the dust. Eyes in their orbits blue still unlike the doll's the fall has not shut nor yet the dust stopped up. No fear henceforth of his ever having not to believe them before that whiteness afar where sky and dust merge. Whiteness neither on earth nor above of the dwarfs as if at the end of their trials the litter left lying between them the white bodies marble still. Ruins all silent marble still little body prostrate at attention wash blue deep in gaping sockets. As in the days erect the arms still cleave to the trunk and to each other the legs made for flight. Fallen unbending all his little length as though pushed from behind by some helping hand or by the wind but not a breath. Or murmur from some dreg of life after the lifelong stand fall fall never fear no fear of your rising again. Sepulchral skull is this then its last state all set for always litter and dwarfs ruins and

SAMUEL BECKETT

little body grey cloudless sky glutted dust verge upon verge
hell air not a breath. And dream of a way in a space with
neither here nor there where all the footsteps ever fell can
never fare nearer to anywhere nor from anywhere further
away. No for in the end for to end yet again by degrees or as
though switched on dark falls there again that certain dark
that alone certain ashes can. Through it who knows yet
another end beneath a cloudless sky same dark it earth and
sky of a last end if ever there had to be another absolutely
had to be.

PART

Two

TOM Mac INTYRE

The Man-Keeper

THEY WERE cutting the hay this day. He was pleased – he was generally pleased – and a little drowsy from the heat. He lay down to rest on the fresh grass, leaving the men to it, and dozed off. When he awoke the day was far gone and there was no one in the field but himself.

He rose and made his way home to dinner feeling a little out of sorts: the sleep hadn't refreshed him at all. In the house he decided against having dinner.

—You don't feel well? the daughter asked.

—I don't feel right, he said, I feel like the bed, and that's where I'm going.

—You were working too hard, you tired yourself.

He explained that he'd had a long sleep in the field.

—You've a bit of a chill from lying on the fresh grass, you'll be fine in the morning.

He took the night's sleep but in the morning he felt worse, and complained of a kind of backward and forward movement in his stomach. When evening came and there wasn't the least sign of improvement, they sent for the doctor. The doctor came and questioned and examined. He listened at length to the troubled stomach.

—Now, the patient called out. Can't you hear the backwards and forwards of it?

The doctor could hear nothing.

—He's imagined the whole thing, he told the wife and daughter. He'll be all right in a few days, I believe, but let me know.

He left a bottle, and departed.

There was no improvement in a few days; the stirring inside had gone away – that was all that could be said. The doctor was sent for once more, and came several days running. In the end he confessed himself baffled, said he'd come no more, and refused to take a penny for his services.

The house was in a state. A second doctor was sent for, and a third, and a fourth. They came singly, and they came in a bunch. They flourished long names for the illness, prescribed potions and ointments, and charged a lump of money for their attentions, which were to no avail whatever. Quack doctors followed the doctors, one came striding over every hill: they muttered and made signs and left powders and distillations and didn't forget to charge either. The patient continued to fade. Six months had passed: look at him now and all you saw was shadow in a bottle.

Summer came again. The invalid had a habit of sitting by the door a few hours a day in good weather. He was sitting there one day when along came a travelling-woman he knew. They greeted each other, and the travelling-woman couldn't but say what she felt.

—You're a changed man since I saw you last.

—I'm sick, he told her, I'm more than sick, and no cure in the world.

—Doctors?

—They've taken half the farm, and for what?

—Healers?

—Robbers all.

He told her the whole story, how he'd fallen asleep on the fresh grass that day, the upset that followed, all the comings and all the goings.

—Fresh grass?

—Fresh grass.

—Moist maybe?

—No, no.

—A stream close by?

—Yes, a stream close by.

—Can you show me the spot?

The spot. It was the last place he wanted to see. Even as she asked, he remembered that it must be up on a year to the day since he'd risen from sleep and walked away from it. His grave. Must he go with her to point out his grave? He dragged himself to the field. He showed her the exact spot; the hay had just been cut, the fresh grass shone. The travelling-woman studied closely the various weeds and herbs growing there, and before long stood up with a small juicy-looking herb between her fingers.

—Do you see that?

—I do.

—Wherever you find that herb you won't have far to look for what's bothering you.

—Go on.

—You've swallowed a man-keeper.

The travelling-woman met the wife and daughter and gave them her information, and her advice.

—There's only one man can save him and that's the Prince of Coolavin.

—And where's he to be found? the wife asked.

—On the brink of Lough Gara, it's three days from here, no great journey.

A long discussion commenced. The wife and daughter were in favour of making the journey; anything that offered hope must be tried. The invalid was the obstacle: he'd had enough of doctors – and others, he couldn't be cured, he was too weak to travel, let him die in peace. The discussion started over. Finally, the three women convinced him to try it.

The four of them set out the next day, travelling by horse and cart, loaded with provisions. They found lodgings the first night and the second night. They took their fill of rest, especially the invalid, who required constant care. On the third day they arrived at the house of the Prince of Coolavin, a fine house on the brink of the lake. They found the owner at home and the invalid told his story.

—Fresh grass you slept on?

—Fresh grass it was.

—A stream close by?

—A stream close by, yes.

—You've swallowed a man-keeper.

The Prince was having his dinner – the main course that day was corned beef. He sat the invalid down at the table, put a great helping of the corned beef before him, and commanded him to eat. The invalid thanked him but drew back – he'd eaten nothing in months, he couldn't touch it.

—Eat that if it was to choke you.

Forced to it, he got through a third of the plate.

—Fine, said the Prince, rest yourself for a few hours now.

In the late afternoon the Prince led him out to a field near the house. The three women followed. There was a stream running through the field. The Prince put him lying down on the bank of the stream, face directly above the water, mouth open and very close to the water.

—Whatever happens, said the Prince, don't move.

The invalid nodded.

The Prince withdrew, and joined the women a few yards back.

Nothing happened for quite a while. At the end of an hour the invalid felt something stirring inside him, first a backwards and a forwards, then making – at a guess – for the spoon of the breast, on in the direction of the throat, next in his mouth, moving out to the tip of the tongue, next no move at all. About a minute later he felt a stirring in his mouth again, then dart out to the tongue-tip, and this time *plop* with it into the water.

—Don't move, the Prince warned.

The invalid didn't move. In a few minutes he experienced a repeat of the stirrings, first the backwards and forwards, then making headway, up into the mouth, out to the tip of the tongue, sliding back, no move at all, forward again, and *plop* again into the water. It was a procession after that, a dozen in all.

—There's your clutch, said the Prince, now for the mother.

The invalid was close to exhaustion, and growing fretful. When another hour passed without incident, he made to rise, he could take no more. The Prince and the travelling-woman had to go forward and forcibly hold him down, one to each shoulder: there they stayed. The wife and daughter, pale the pair, watched from their same station.

A short time passed, and the invalid felt a stirring inside that surpassed anything so far, a stirring that was almost a tearing, forcing its way up to the throat, through and into the mouth, and resting there. The invalid moved. His hand shot to his mouth but, if he was quick, the man-keeper was quicker: back down the throat with her, gone.

—Didn't I tell you not to move? snapped the Prince, you've maybe frightened her for good.

But he hadn't. She came up again in about twenty minutes, the same tearing and pushing, up into the mouth, timidly there for a minute or two, scouting, back and forth, back and forth, out at last to the tip of the tongue, and *plop* — seven times the plop of any of the others — into the water.

—Well you knew the tub of butter when you found it, the Prince roared after her.

They carried the invalid back to the house. He said nothing for three hours. The first words he said were:

—I'm a new man.

SEAN O'FAOLAIN

The Talking Trees

THERE WERE four of them in the same class at the Red Abbey, all under fifteen. They met every night in Mrs Coffey's sweetshop at the top of Victoria Road to play the fruit machine, smoke fags and talk about girls. Not that they really talked about them – they just winked, leered, nudged one another, laughed, grunted and groaned about them, or said things like 'See her legs?' 'Yaroosh!' 'Whamm!' 'Ouch!' 'Ooof!' or 'If only, if only!' But if anybody had said, 'Only what?' they would not have known precisely what. They knew nothing precisely about girls, they wanted to know everything precisely about girls, there was nobody to tell them all the things they wanted to know about girls and that they thought they wanted to do with them. Aching and wanting, not knowing, half guessing, they dreamed of clouds upon clouds of fat, pink, soft, ardent girls billowing towards them across the horizon of their future. They might just as well have been dreaming of pink porpoises moaning at their feet for love.

In the sweetshop the tall glass jars of coloured sweets shone in the bright lights. The one-armed fruit machine went zing. Now and again girls from St Monica's came in to buy sweets, giggle roguishly and over-pointedly ignore them. Mrs Coffey was young, buxom, fair-haired, blue-eyed and very good-looking. They admired her so much that one night when Georgie Watchman whispered to them that she had fine bubs Dick Franks told him curtly not to be so coarse, and Jimmy Sullivan said in his most toploftical voice, 'Georgie Watchman, you should be jolly well ashamed of yourself, you

are no gentleman,' and Tommy Gong Gong said nothing but nodded his head as insistently as a ventriloquist's dummy.

Tommy's real name was Tommy Flynn, but he was younger than any of them so that neither he nor they were ever quite sure that he ought to belong to the gang at all. To show it they called him all sorts of nicknames, like Inch because he was so small; Fatty because he was so puppy-fat; Pigeon because he had a chest like a woman; Gong Gong because after long bouts of silence he had a way of suddenly spraying them with wild bursts of talk like a fire alarm attached to a garden sprinkler.

That night all Georgie Watchman did was to make a rude blubberlip noise at Dick Franks. But he never again said anything about Mrs Coffey. They looked up to Dick. He was the oldest of them. He had long eyelashes like a girl, perfect manners, the sweetest smile and the softest voice. He had been to two English boarding schools, Ampleforth and Downside, and in Ireland to three, Clongowes, Castleknock and Rockwell, and had been expelled from all five of them. After that his mother had made his father retire from the Indian Civil, come back to the old family house in Cork and, as a last hope, send her darling Dicky to the Red Abbey day-school. He smoked a corncob pipe and dressed in droopy plus fours with chequered stockings and red flares, as if he was always just coming from or going to the golf course. He played cricket and tennis, games that no other boy at the Red Abbey could afford to play. They saw him as the typical school captain they read about in English boys' papers like *The Gem* and *The Magnet*, *The Boy's Own Paper*, *The Captain*, and *Chums*, which was where they got all those swanky words like Wham, Ouch, Yaroosh, Ooof and Jolly Well. He was their Tom Brown, their Bob Cherry, their Tom Merry, those heroes who were always leading Greyfriars School or Blackfriars School to victory on the cricket field amid the cap-tossing huzzas of the juniors and the admiring smiles of visiting parents. It never occurred to them that *The Magnet* or *The Gem* would have seen all four of them as perfect models