On Bellingham Bay

from “The Living”

Author’s note: The setting for this piece is Bellingham Bay, on Puget Sound, 80 miles north of Seattle. The date is January 6, 1892. It is the dead of winter. The hero, Clare Fishburn, has received a death threat. He walks by the water, as darkness falls.

Chapter XLI

Clare walked south by the beach. The sky was dimming already, subtly, as though someone were slowly lowering the wick of a lamp. Far offshore gulls were crying into the southwest wind over a herring ball in the water and diving into it, and rising blown with more cries, while the dark water churned as if the sea’s floor had broken beneath it and let loose . . .

Why had he possessed such an unwarranted confidence in himself? His shoes ground on the stones.

He could see a bird’s tracks below the tideline, where the line of black and red gravel gave way to sandy mud. The tracks appeared out of nowhere, as if God had formed a creature and set it down. Three toe claws poked holes in the mud, and a wide web connected them. The bird had walked, manlike, along the shore with a steady, firm tread. Clare followed the line of tracks, his neck forward.

The webbed tracks looked witless, as if the bird lacked a head.
Abruptly now, the tracks stopped—with the two feet pushed deep at the claws. The tracks ended for no reason, and the sandy mud in their path was blank; the bird had flown up. Clare turned and saw that his own passage had made blunt tracks, too, in the gravel; he was trailing himself, and his tracks ended under his shoes.

He was, in his entirety, a spool of footprints, starting north of here in the settlement beach cabin where he learned to pull himself up on his mother’s black skirt. His trail vanished and resumed as he walked and rode through his days and years; he lived twelve years in Goshen and moved back to Whatcom, walked to and from the high school and office. Now on this beach his track went winding behind him like a peel, as though time were a knife peeling him like an apple and would continue through him till he was gone. His tracks, his lifetime tracks, would end abruptly, also—but he would have gone not up, like a bird into the sky, but down, into the ground.

“I shall go to the gates of the grave,” Clare thought. It was a passage from Isaiah, in which dying King Hezekiah turned his face to the wall. “I shall go to the gates of the grave: I am deprived of the residue of my years. I said, I shall not see the Lord, even the Lord, in the land of the living: I shall behold man no more with the inhabitants of the world.”

A man would not know which step was his last, to pay heed to it. Where on the face of the earth would his footprints be fresh when the trapper tracked him down? The boys would have to carry his body along its last few routes.

He needed to learn how to die. He had learned everything else as it came along—how to read, drive a team, scythe a field and winnow grain, fell a tree, miter a corner, how to use and fix a lathe and a steam saw, demonstrate electromagnetism, set purlins for a roof, cut pipe to plumb a sink, machine an axle bearing, price a section, and sell a lot—and he excelled at what he learned, and now he had to learn this next thing, to release it all. Was it not important? How does a man learn to die when the experts are mum?

Old Conrad Grogan, the surveyor, nearly died, was all but dead, and came back to life and stood up still thin and erect—his black mus-
taches combed over his lip, his yellow hair in thin strands, potbellied, competent—and lived another six years. To Clare it looked like Conrad Grogan threw himself into those years: he started the debating society, married a hard-favored widow down on Whidbey Island, brought her back, whacked up a treehouse for her grandchildren, built himself a little sailing dory painted red, and strode the streets of the town right lively, his face creased and shining. Then he took to bed screaming for a few days, and panted for a few days, turned purple, and died. Clare did not know if Conrad Grogan died well, either the first time or the last, or what it took when a man had only general warning, or if he could work himself around to where something was required which he could then produce on the spot, such as, for example, courage—which would not loosen the tight situation, but would please him and cap all he had learned. He imagined June’s voice adding, “Hurrah, boys.”

Chunks of tan foam spume blew over the beach stones; when one chunk tumbled into another, their stiff suds stuck together, and they trembled.

Clare had not seen much sunshine lately. The needle on John Ireland’s aneroid lay pinned to the left, as if the wind held it down. The mercury in John Ireland’s thermometer stayed in the forties day and night. Clare had seen colored engravings in the weeklies, and read stories, which suggested to him that winters, in other places, were both colder and sunnier...

The tide was coming in, and Clare moved up off the gravel. He climbed over the black shark carcass that Glee had dragged in—an enormous, irregular rind. He rounded the pitted sandstone ledges of the headland, sea ledges awash and sharp with barnacles, and crossed a beach, stepping on massed logs that storm waves stranded. The logs’ old dried roots stuck up higher than his head, tall as he was. It would be melancholy to break a leg coming back in the dark of night. He presented a good target now, raised against the pale sea and walking straight on logs five feet down from the brush cover. He glanced into the dense woods, but had to look back at once to mind his footing.
He was finding—now, in his forties—adult life unexpectedly meaningful and grave; the path was widening and deepening before him. Tragedy is a possibility only for adults; so is heroism.

Clare walked bent, his long neck down and his chin up. He could still see, on the freezing water, the dark dumb ducks floating in rafts that tipped and rode swells. The overpowering, slushy sky was closing down. He should go back, he knew, but he went on, and his thighs itched and tingled as they always did when he walked in the cold. He made for a stretch of sand ahead. When he reached it he stopped and drove his hands into his pockets. Torn seaweed littered the sand, and wet fir cones, bottles, and twigs.

Naturally society cherished itself alone; it prized what everyone agreed was precious, despised what everyone agreed was despicable, and ignored what no one mentioned—all to its own enhancement, and with the loud view that these bubbles and vapors were eternal and universal. If [his wife] June had stressed to [their daughter] Mabel that she was going to die, would she have learned to eat with a fork? Society’s loyal members, having sacrificed their only lives to its caprices, hastened to entrap the next generation into agreement, so their follies would not have been vain and they could all go down together, blind and well turned out. The company, the club, and the party had offered him a position like bait, and he bit. He had embedded himself in the company like a man bricked into a wall, and whirled with the building’s maps, files, and desks, senselessly, as the planet spun and death pooled on the cold basement floors. Who could blame him?—when people have always lived so. Now, however, he saw the city lifted away, and the bricks and files vaporized; he saw the preenings of men laid low, and the comforts of family scattered. He was free and loosed on the black beach.

Clare sat on a log, shaved strands of a plug into his palm, ground them to powder using his knife handle as a pestle, and loaded and lighted his pipe. “As a lion, so will he break all my bones . . .” Having felt his freedom, must he now die? Conversely, could he endure this freedom, when it burned in his stomach and smoked in his throat?
In the match's flare he could see a swollen line of sand grains trailing over the hard beach in scallops. The back swash of the last high tide dropped sand grains there. It was in the summer of '83 that Krakatoa exploded. Clare was in his fruit-grafting enthusiasm then, and did not remark the famously sublime sunsets the ash caused around the world, because sunsets here were routinely sublime. He did notice what the newspapers proclaimed in the following months: that the explosion caused one wave to travel the sea, wash over Java and Sumatra, and drown thirty-six thousand people. Those thirty-six thousand people reproached him, as he read the paper and sipped his tea on the puncheon porch, for he was a good democrat, and believed that any man was as good as any other, roughly.

He had asked his mother if she thought God punished those thirty-six thousand people for living wrong, and visibly shocked her. She replied that they were all going to die anyway, which shocked him, and she added that it was time he got married, which he knew.

His eye sought the line of forest on the headland, but its black silhouette was lost in the black sky, as if the sky had abolished it. To the south he could see no fires from Finn Beach. Out over the water, in three directions, distance sputtered out. The wind had fallen; the tide made a small approaching noise like gibberish.

The dark was now thick, flannel. Its blackness had texture and depth, like that of a charcoaled page, in which dark clouds billowed.

Here, in all the world, there shone only his own light—his red burning tobacco, and the glowing dottle beneath it, and the black unburnt bits above. There was no other light, human or inhuman, up or down the beach, or out on the invisible islands, or back in the woods, or anywhere on earth or in heaven, except the chill and fantastical sheen on the sea, whose cause was unfathomable. Before him extended the visible universe: an unstable, thick darkness almost met the silver line of the sea. A long crack had opened between the thick darkness and the water. The crack, half the apparent height of a man, gave out upon a thin darkness, black without substance or stars. He looked out upon the thin darkness, and seemed to hear the souls of the dead
whir and slip in its deep fastness. They wanted back. Their bodies in
the graveyard on the cliff could not see to steer their sleeping course,
their sleeping heels in the air.

It was nearing five o'clock now. When Clare stood, his shoes on the
beach rolled stones. He smelt the chill on the rising water. Inside his
gabardine jacket, under his vest and collarless shirt, and inside his
long-legged underwear, his flesh was losing its heat. By the time he
rounded again the headland towards the town, his fingers felt to one
another like pipe lengths. He wanted back, too. Obenchain's stump
stood on the cliff between him and the town; he had gone too far. He
heard his own footsteps. He inhaled and exhaled tensely, as if he might
topple; he seemed to taste mineral darkness on his tongue, or ash, like
the moon. It was too late to walk on logs; he felt with his feet for the
narrowing beach. Ahead, a dim light smudged the cloud cover over the
town, as its dwellings and streetlights cast up into the muffling black-
ness their lamps. He was not yet home.

He came up on Pearl Street by the town wharf. There he saw, in the
frail light of the warehouse lamp, an orange sea star wrapped round
the wharf piling. It was a starfish with many thick, short arms. It
looked like a swollen medallion the size of a dinner tray, and alive.
Clare had seen a sea star's thorny hole of a mouth; the mouth was at its
thick center, on the underside, on the piling. Oystermen knifed star-
fish on sight, for a starfish humped its suckers around an oyster, forced
open its shell with its contracting arms, vomited its stomach out of its
own mouth, inside out, insinuated it between the oyster's parted
shells, and dissolved and digested the oyster's soft parts directly. Now,
as Clare passed, the black tide was wetting the beast, and it detached
itself, one orange edge at a time. Its crusty nubs moved thickly. Their
pipes loosened their grip on the piling, and the animal dropped into
the water.

"Thus saith the Lord," Clare thought, climbing past the town to
Golden Street, "Set thine house in order; for thou shalt die, and not
live."