

# Bill Coyle

## *Baltic*

i.

Before it was inhabited, this island rose  
from the sea each morning, then sank each night—  
or so the saga has it; it was only  
when the first man landed on the shore and lit  
a fire there that the spell was broken.

Waking from a nightmare I can't remember—  
Is it the same one every night?—I hear,  
when my heart has stopped pounding and I've caught my  
breath,  
the sigh of the tideless surf not far from here.  
I fumble for the light-switch. It's here somewhere.

ii.

We hear a church bell tolling  
just as we cycle past  
a house with a flag at half-mast,  
just as a dull blast  
from the limestone quarry causes  
the landscape to skip a beat.

iii.

Hard by the hospital, by the narrow pathway  
that led down to the harbor, stood a truncated pyramid  
topped not by the caduceus but by Hermes' staff  
with its twin, twined snakes. That  
was the self-same symbol we saw every day,  
most often backed by the red cross  
decorating an amulet pinned to the breast  
of the nurse who monitored your mother's morphine.  
On each of the pyramid's four sides,  
an image: an egg, a serpent coiled clockwise,

the serpent devouring its own tail, the serpent  
coiled again, though counter-clockwise this time.  
A copper plate at the pyramid's base  
read *Lyss till naturen*, or *Listen to Nature*.  
God knows we tried, but we heard nothing but  
the laughter  
of gulls and the thirsty lapping of the waters.  
Back at her bedside we watched the sunset  
turn the entire, exemplary world  
to earth, air, water, fire.

iv.

Not a sound out of your mother  
save for her shallow breathing  
and the bubble of oxygen  
and water by her bedside.  
While she went in and out  
of consciousness, we sat  
whispering to each other  
or silent stared out through  
the sick room window to  
a horizon that—no doubt  
this was a matter of  
perspective—loomed above  
the hospital, the island.  
The sea was tranquil, save  
for when the mainland ferry  
arrived or departed, sending  
wave on unnatural wave  
undulating in.

v.

August sun, fair breezes. The days of summer  
last, at least in relative terms, forever.  
Time still passes, naturally: clouds pass over,  
cloudberry ripen,

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fledgling sparrows take to the air and vanish,  
and the days, past Midsummer, have grown shorter.  
Still, these things—days, berries, birds, clouds—are symbols,  
meaning eternal.

Is this, then, the paradise I have looked for  
all my days, in all I have read and written?  
Is this the redeeming, the quintessential  
lyrical moment?

No, since if it were I would see in the garden,  
standing with the patience of lichen crosses,  
all our dead, their faces like suns, their arms wide  
open in welcome.

## ***Airports: An Ode for Michael Lind***

If the poetic line,  
as seems to be the case, is  
that there could not be any less  
poetic places  
than major airports, then I guess  
I ought in all good conscience to resign  
my membership in the great brotherhood,  
since I can't help but think these places good.

Granted, the meals are bland  
(though laughably expensive)  
the travelers bored beyond belief  
(though apprehensive);  
granted, a soul might come to grief  
(and many have) trying to understand  
a given airport's kabalistic maze.  
Still, these are places worthy of our praise,

worthy because in fact they are  
a means by which we realize  
the ancient dream of humankind:  
not just to travel fast and far  
but to ascend into the skies  
and, living, leave the world behind.

And if the terminals,  
their faults being so apparent,  
seem lowly means to that high end,  
that's still no warrant  
for purist bards to condescend.  
Let them remember that within these walls,  
among kitsch art and commerce, we await  
translation to that other, higher state.

Let them remember, too,  
that air travel, however  
standardized it has grown, remains

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a bold endeavor:

Safe though they are as houses, planes  
crash upon take-off, plummet from the blue  
or serve as flying bombs in an assault.  
So let the poets leave off finding fault;

let them, as is meet and right,  
recall how, in antiquity,  
that engineer extraordinaire,  
father of Icarus and flight,  
arrived bereft in Italy.  
What he did once we daily dare.

## Episodes

### America

He's stopped at an abandoned service station  
next to a vacant road in the southwest.  
Fishing a pack of Winstons from his vest,  
he lights one, spreads a map, checks his location.  
You the viewer have already guessed  
that here, beyond the veil of civilization,  
he will be put to some dramatic test.

### England

His car, sleek as those spaceships on the covers  
of science fiction mags from days of yore,  
purrs as he puts the pedal to the floor.  
Down darkened, cottaged byways he maneuvers,  
coolly evading spies or smugglers or...  
But then you see it: there in his rear-view hovers  
a ring of lights around a pulsing core.

### The Continent

A distant *au revoir*, then, on the landing.  
The waiting, now, bathed in the pool's blue glow.  
The grounds, space being scarce, are modest, though  
the house itself is vast, with a commanding  
view of the starry city spread below.  
He and the Countess have an understanding:  
he'll slip back in when all the others go.

### The Far East

Separated from his expedition,  
lost in a blizzard in the mountains, he  
is welcomed in by a community  
of monks who are, according to tradition,

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only a legend from antiquity.

One of them sees in him—not quite contrition,  
no—but something no one else can see.

## ***The Man in the Moon***

No, he is not Cain, wandering still in exile,  
dogged by a dog we take to be "the foul  
fiend" incognito, burdened with a thornbush  
emblematic of the thorns that grew  
in answer to God's curse on our first parents...

No, he is not Endymion, that shepherd-  
prince whom the goddess of the moon so loved  
she took him up into her dwelling, where  
he lives on, now immortal and the doting  
father of some fifty demigoddesses...

No, but he is a small grey man—grey hair,  
grey eyes, grey trenchcoat buttoned to the top—  
who blends chameleon-like into the moonscape.  
The type who, had he lived among us, surely  
would have been no-one or a master spy.

He lives alone here in a little crater  
left on the shoreline of the Sea of Storms,  
the roof that he will never build his shelter,  
the stones he gathers every day his bread,  
the gathering of stones his occupation.

This is the kind of life that he was born to.  
He finds it hard to imagine any other,  
and when he thinks of us, it is with pity.  
How, he wonders, can we bear to live  
where there is still so much left to be lost?

Here he sits watching wave on non-existent  
wave break on beaches that do not decay,  
counting above him in the darkness stars  
that do not flicker (like our own) like candles—  
though they are burning just as surely down.

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**Bill Coyle's** poems and translations have appeared in such journals as *The Hudson Review*, *Poetry*, *The New Republic* and *PN Review*. His first book, *The God of This World to His Prophet*, won the New Criterion Poetry Prize and has just been published by Ivan R. Dee.