

Big Skies, Inner Rain

for Dennis Haskell

Tony Curtis,¹ Ireland

*Rain, bleak grey skies and blackbirds
make for a certain kind of poetry.*

I was thinking this to myself
as I sat in sunlight by the Swan River.

I saw Dennis coming
along the shore:

grey bearded like an apostle,
but tall and thin as Samuel Beckett,

and like Sam, casually dressed,
looking for all the world as if

he was about to head off for a game
of tennis or a quiet round of golf –

the sportsman sheltering
the scholar, the poet.

I almost said,
the rebel.

Back then, in the 70s, writing
Poetry in Australia was a rebel act.

¹ **Tony Curtis** was born in Dublin in 1955. He was educated at Essex University and Trinity College Dublin. An award-winning poet, Curtis has published ten warmly received collections. His most recent titles are *This Flight Tonight* (Occasional Press 2019); *Approximately in the Key of C* (Arc Publications 2015); *Pony* with drawings and paintings by David Lilburn (Occasional Press 2013); *Currach* with photographs by Liam Blake (Real Ireland 2013), and *Folk* (Arc Publications 2011).

Last year, Curtis was awarded the prestigious ‘Lawrence O’Shaughnessy Award for Poetry’ at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. He has also been awarded the Irish National Poetry Prize and has read his poetry to great acclaim all over the world. He is a member of Aosdána. Email: tonycurtis@eircom.net.

When you met him he always
spoke of other Australian poets:

Slessor, Ston, Murray, Forbes, Wright, Harwood, Hewett, Kinsella...
rarely of himself.

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Dennis was the first
Australian poet I ever met.

I was introduced to him by Joe O'Sullivan,
a Corkman who had lived in Perth since 1966.

Like Joe,
kindest of souls.

He wears his learning lightly. Yes,
I liked him from that first sunny day.

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The first time I read
with Dennis in Ireland,
I wasn't myself,
I was the West Australian
poet Tracy Ryan.

Tracy had missed her flight
or mistook the day,
the month, the year.
Whatever happened
she wasn't there.

So
I was asked
to fill
her shoes,
to be her voice.

A warm summer's evening.
I sat listening to Dennis read:

the philosopher and the critic
were everywhere; his thoughts
mischievous as light on waves.

I was quietly
drawn into his world:
a mix of red earth,
eucalyptus leaves,
clouds, big skies, ghost gums.

Strangely, more rain fell
than sun shone.
The words '*darkness*' and '*alone*'
appearing more often
than '*happy*' and '*content*.'

I remember
thinking to myself:
that line,
that's pure Dennis,
that and that and that.
Meanwhile,
the years have rolled on
between visits
to Ireland
and Western Australia.

I have read
all Dennis's books,
heard him
lecture and read
again and again.

His words,
his lines,
his craft appear
to be ever more simple,
ever more refined.

These days, the poems
can unbutton your soul.
Filled with love and loss,

they are raindrops falling on
parched earth, parched lives.

It is poetry
with its shirt off,
raw,
revealing,
nude.

The words so close
you can feel their breath
on your skin. The poem
forever there
like a scar.

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