

The Master of the Air Piano

Out the hospice window, the evening sky is darkening blood red,
enormous bats flap, swarm around the Sacred Heart church steeple

The rain hasn't stopped these three days. Tears I can't yet cry

My tired eyes shift across the room to this new version of my friend.
This man, old too young, who drifts back and forth from the world we share
, to strange ones I can't follow him to

I gently massage the withered muscles of his legs, feeling little more than the bones.
His thighs are like your upper arms, his wife says.
Stealing the thought out of my head, words I was careful not to let slip out.

His angel looks to me, caresses his other leg,
Even here, still cheerful, She's a bloody miracle.

He smiles softly, enjoying our touch, eyelids fluttering like moths over his closed eyes
Lying flat on his hydraulic bed, A large baby bird fallen softly onto his back,
Lips and facial muscles move erratically, as if to speak

Suddenly, his right arm darts up into space,
perhaps to turn the page on the music stand in his otherworld
where he conducts and plays his piano part

Then like little animals, his hands start crawling and racing nervously
all around his body, touching , scratching, frantically searching for a place to hide.

More than once, with a slap from nowhere, he has surprised her,
knocked her on the head , wakened her from deep sleep on the bed beside him,
as he speaks to invisible friends

'Oh, There he is. John McCassey just walked into the room.'
He raises his fingers to his lips, sipping a cup of otherworld tea.

Its the Ketamine and morphine that's done this to him. Vets use it to tranquilize
horses, Others for a trip sideways, whatever that means.

It takes him away from here,. from her, from me, from himself,
and most importantly from the pain.

The pain, yes the new pain that arrived when the tumor grew
and smashed through the second lumbar vertebra.

First it was strange sensations, a loss of balance then everything down there
went on holiday, both legs, and all control of the bottom end.

I've felt so suicidal more than a few times, he whispered to me,
out of her earshot, just after I arrived.
He knew how hard it is for her to hear him speak those words.

Enough of all that, he says 'let's play one of your old songs.'

I tune up my guitar
Just as I am ready to start, The Musical Director,
eyes closed, whispers hoarsely, through a dry throat
to the rest of the band in his otherworld

'Take it from the top boys,'

Startled, I quickly kick into the first riff.
He's right there, Transported, both hands in the air,
feeling the space, the shape of the sound.

Each hand softly held, keeping time.
A secret smile and he nods right, points a bony finger

The drummer and bass player come in. We're in the groove, carried by the music.

His head joyfully jogs, bouncing from side to side, arms in mid air,
hands resting softly on the keyboard, waiting for his solo, that's just coming up

And he's launched, weaving his magic, fingers dancing across the keys,
feeling the sound within the sound, and with a smile, slipping in an off beat or a pause
that almost makes you fall off your chair.

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This man
who can make a piano sing
like wading sea birds in shallow water, or thunder crashing off an angry mountain,
then lures you along with melodies so sweet they startle you with their sadness.

Then, as suddenly as an evening breeze, the song is fading out
The winged hands flutter onto the sheets.

The creative director smiles a satisfied smile, opens his eyes, just a little.
looks around, 'That was great guys, thanks.'

I put my guitar back in its case, slip off stage, then turn to look back.

The angel has lain down beside him, wrapped her wings lovingly around
this frail man, the master of the air piano,
asleep on his single bed.

Sydney and Mana, NZ February 2010