

Stirrings Still

by [Paul Illidge](#) (May 2025)



Stormy Sea (Emil Nolde, 1930)

I

We are all born mad. Some remain so.

That is soon said. Let us not waste our time
In idle discourse. Let us do something
While we have the chance. It is not every day
That we are needed. Not personally needed
At such a place, at such a moment of time.

Shall we make the most of it then,
Before it's too late, in anticipation of some
Tangible return?

We're not magicians.

We can always try. Persevere in what
We have resolved. Shall we?

I suppose, though it's past midnight.
I never knew such silence.
The earth might be uninhabited.

Have courage. Be resolute.

*The Lord upholdeth all that fall and
Raiseth up all those that be bowed down.*

This always provided consolation in
My wandering. From the Psalms.
I would say it to myself while travelling
In the towns, the woods and wilderness,
Tarrying by the sea, sometimes in tears
Before the islands and peninsulas
Where the little yellow lights of man
Lit the night as I crouched on the sand,
In the lee of the cliffs with the smell
Of the seaweed and the wet rock and
The howling of the wind, the waves
Whipping me with foam or sighing
On the beach softly clawing the sand—

And you were happy?

No, I was never quite that, but strangely
Wished the night would never end,
And morning never come when men wake

*And say, Let's go, we'll soon be dead,
Let's make the most of it.*

II

I am alone in the garden. My mother
In the kitchen making ready for
Afternoon tea with Mrs. Coote.
Making the wafer thin bread and
Sugared butter Mrs. Coote so adores.

From behind a bush I watch Mrs. Coote
Arrive, a small thin sour woman.
She wonders where I am.
My mother answers her saying,
He is playing in the garden.

I climb to near the top of a great fir.
I sit a little listening to all the sounds,
Then throw myself off. The great boughs
Break my fall. The needles.
I lie with my face to the ground.

Climbing the tree again my mother
Answers Mrs. Coote saying, He has been
A very naughty boy.

III

In another dark, or in the same,
Another devising of it all for company.
This at first sight seems clear,
But as the eye dwells it grows obscure.
Indeed the longer the eye dwells
The obscurer it grows. Till the eye

Closes and, freed from sight, the mind
Enquires, What does this mean?
What finally does this mean that
At first sight seemed so clear?
Till it, the mind, closes as it were.
As the window might close in a
Dark, empty room. The single window
Giving on outer dark. Then nothing more.
No. Unhappily no. Pangs of faint light
And stirrings still. Unformulable gropings
Of the mind. Unstillable.

Spiritually a year of profound gloom
And indigence until that memorable
Night in March, at the end of the jetty,
In the howling wind, never to be forgotten,
When suddenly I saw the whole thing.
The vision, at last. This I fancy is what
I have chiefly to record on the final tape,
Against the day when my work will
Be done and perhaps no place left
In my memory, warm or cold,
For the miracle that . . . for the fire
That set it alight.

What I suddenly saw then was this,
That the belief I had been going on all
My life, namely that the dark I have
Always struggled to keep under
Is, in reality, my most unshatterable
Association until the dissolution
Of storm and night with the light
Of understanding, the fire felt with
My face in her breasts and my hand
On her as we lay there without moving.

—Gooseberries, she said. I said again

I thought it was hopeless and no good
Going on, and she agreed without opening
Her eyes. I asked her to look at me
And, after a few moments, she did,
But the eyes just slits because of
The sun's glare. I bent over to
Get them in the shadow and
They opened. Let me in, I said.

We drifted in among the rushes
And stuck. The way they went down,
Sighing before the bow! I lay down
Across her with my face in her breasts
And my hand on her. We lay there without
Moving. But under us all moved,
And moved us, gently, up and down,
And from side to side.

IV

Past midnight. Never knew such silence.
The earth might be uninhabited.
Perhaps my best years are gone,
When there was a chance of happiness.
But I wouldn't want them back,
Not with the fire in me now.
No, I wouldn't want them back . . .

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Paul Illidge's true crime memoir *RSKY BZNS* (New English Review Press, 2022), is a "fascinating story" (Frank Abagnale, Jr.,

author of *Catch Me if You Can*), a “gripping and intricate read” (Conrad Black). His memoir *THE BLEAKS* (ECW Press), was a *Globe & Mail Canada* Best Book of 2014. His new book *THE COYOTE TABERNACLE CHOIR* is a collection of 17 creative nonfiction stories. His modern prose versions of Shakespeare’s seven greatest plays, *The Shakespeare Novels: Hamlet, King Lear, Othello, Twelfth Night, Midsummer Night’s Dream, Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet*, are all available internationally at www.kobobooks.com

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