

Catherine O'Sullivan

À la recherche du Sam B

'I have two questions for you,' said the gravedigger.

We were standing in the centre of Cimetière de Montparnasse, sweaty and fed-up. For the past forty-five minutes I had been failing to locate Samuel Beckett's grave. Just before the gravedigger appeared, in fact, I had been on the brink of giving up. Other famous graves surrounded us and they were going to have to do. There were maps - cartoonish, mocking, not-to-scale - posted at all four of the graveyard's magnetic poles, but they were no help. My friend and I had cultivated quite a routine: standing at one border of the cemetery, we would squint at the neat reticulated lines of the map for long enough that we felt sure of our orientation, then we would stride off with purpose *À la recherche du Sam B*, until finally we reached the opposite wall, Beckett's grave remaining resolutely unadmired.

Occasionally we would traipse past actual mourners, small groups clustered around fresh graves, and I would feel a stab of doubt about the whole enterprise. Weren't we being foolish, edging on blasphemous? It was difficult to be deferential when the maps kept discombobulating us. How did we keep missing him? I was ready to give up on the idealised holiday moment I had been holding in my imagination like a premature snapshot, bowing my head in front of the writer's tomb. My sneakers were pinching, I was picturing a cold lager, and anyway, abandonment seemed like an aptly Beckettian response to defeat.

And that was when the gravedigger appeared, looking like his own platonic ideal, as if he had trundled his wheelbarrow straight out of an illustrated dictionary for children. Handsome, in a ragged, sunken-cheeked kind of way; a louche, broad-brimmed hat perched on his head like an afterthought; a cigarette winking from behind his ear. I didn't examine his fingernails, but I imagine they were limned with dirt.

I took my chances.

'Excusez-moi,' I began. 'Je cherche Beckett?'

The gravedigger's face shifted, subtly, as I spoke. He leaned contemplatively on his rake. A pause hung in the close air between the three of us, and I wondered if I should try my French again.

'I have two questions for you,' he replied in English.

Not just any old English, though. The sound of his voice instantly made my heart bulge. He could've been my neighbour.

'My first question is, you're from Dublin aren't you?'

This Parisian gravedigger, it turns out, was born a short walk from where I myself had grown up.

'What are you doing here?' I asked. He sucked in his cheeks and let out a short pop of air from his mouth, then straightened up and made a gesture of sweeping expansion.

'This whole shebang,' he said, not bothering to remove the tinge of pride that glinted off the statement. 'I'm taking care of it for a little while. Figuring things out.'

'Do you enjoy it?' I asked.

'I do,' he said and let another, slightly matrimonial, pause linger.

'And so, you're looking for Beckett. My second question is, then, dy'a not know you're standing right beside him?'

I looked down at the slab of concrete directly in front of me, the toes of my sneakers pointing straight towards the engraved letters spelling out S A M U E L B E C K E T T.

So, there he was.

In a fiction, the gravedigger would have accompanied my friend and I to a nearby bar where we would have drunk ourselves into camaraderie and realised we had cousins in common. These first coincidences would, as the Parisian night darkened, have multiplied and assumed a fullness of meaning, until an impossible adventure unfolded along the banks of the Seine.

But instead, in this sunny, slightly dusty, reality, we simply thanked the gravedigger for showing us the grave and watched him lope away, deftly steering his wheelbarrow among the plots. I was half-afraid to blink, in case he disappeared in a shimmer of light. He kept going, though, until a sharp left turn meant we could no longer see him.

Of course, the gravestone itself could only be a slight letdown after that. Yet there was nothing to be done except stare at it, privately cherishing the gain of that one, oddly-perfect, holiday moment