

Ciaran Carson

STILL LIFE



Gallery Books

Still Life

is first published
simultaneously in paperback
and in a clothbound edition
on 16 October 2019.

The Gallery Press

Loughcrew
Oldcastle
County Meath
Ireland

www.gallerypress.com

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ISBN 978 1 91133 782 9 *paperback*
978 1 91133 783 6 *clothbound*

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

Still Life receives financial assistance
from the Arts Council.



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Diego Velázquez, Old Woman Cooking Eggs, 1618

The two eggs in the terracotta pot the *pièce de résistance*,
albumen coagulating
Into solid white, fringes still diaphanous, shimmering —
or is it
Simmering? — in oil or water, i.e. are they being fried or
poached? That is
A question that has fascinated art historians for centuries.
It reminds us,
Deirdre, of our sessions at the Atlantic Circle house back
in the late 70s,
When we'd drink and smoke and play all night like there
was no tomorrow —
Fiddles, flutes, Powers Gold Label whiskey, Gallaher's Blues
cigarettes — then to rise
At noon and make the Ulster Fry (hangover cure *par excellence*)
for six
Or seven of us, each with his or her own thinking as regards
the egg: e.g.
Broken into oil so hot it's nearly smoking, so you get those
crispy golden
Lacy edges, or basted gently, as these eggs by Velázquez
seem to be.

I look it up in a book and find the painting is a *bodegón* —
the cellar
Of a *bodega*, a tavern, where the commonplace of food,
drink and kitchenware
Is on display, and hence, in Spanish art, the term for 'still life'.
And then
I remember The Bodega bar in Belfast, the kind of place
that thought itself
A cut above the ordinary. Wrought-iron window grilles outside.
Dark interior —
It took your eyes a while to get accustomed to the gloom —
big sherry casks,

Fake wooden beams. I think a string of plastic onions.
A Tio Pepe ad.
It's 1973, and I'm pushing a pen in Family Income Supplements
behind the City Hall.
The IRA were bombing downtown shops and offices on
a weekly basis
It seems. My dreams are filled with wavering buildings,
avalanches of astonished
Glass. Now and then an alarm would sound and orderly the clerks
would proceed

Into the ordinary, glad cacophony of screeching jeeps
and klaxons wailing,
Freed for the day. So a trio of us would repair to The Bodega,
there to 'drink,
And leave the world unseen'. What did we talk about? Politics
I think not.
I know we shared a taste for literature. Faulkner, Lawrence,
Carlos Williams.
Joyce of course. And I was thinking of writing myself, I'd gone
so far as to buy
A typewriter. What joy, to sit there in the chiaroscuro, round
after round!
Every so often of an afternoon we'd hear a muffled thunder
and the room
Would tremble, whiskey shiver in the glass. I dream I'm ordering
another . . . there,
Behind the bar, where you'd expect a mirror, is the Velázquez.
And I think,
How close to life, the texture of the blood red, papery
dried red
Pepper pods! And then I think, but I knew nothing of
Velázquez then.
And where are the two companions that for years I haven't
thought of until now?

Jeffrey Morgan, Hare Bowl, 2008

His gift revealed itself — a little book-sized still life
of a bowl on a shelf —
Spongeware, 1850s — biscuit fired, says Jeffrey — decorated
with a cut sponge,
A daisy chain of little blue flowers along the rim, and
under them two hares
At full stretch running off to the right on the curve
of the bowl. There'd be
Two others on the other side you can't see. Like the flowers,
they're a faded blue, as is
The grass at their feet. Or is it shadow . . . When we think
of the painted hares
We think of the hares that have entered our lives,
however fleetingly.

The hare on the runway at Aldergrove airport, seen as you
came into land.
The hare that crossed my path on the Milltown road, hedgerow
to hedgerow in
The blink of an eye. The hare that stood and looked at us
on Rathlin for an age.
The hare that you saw in your garden in Antrim, as tall as
the child that you were.
So we go back to when we never knew each other, never
dreaming then that we
Would end up in this here and now. We look at the *Hare Bowl*,
then look at
Each other and smile. All day it draws us back to look at it,
and look at it again.

That was then. This morning you've taken the bus into town
to buy Easter eggs
And chocolates, and I'm left to contemplate the *Hare Bowl*
on my own. It looks

Good upon the mantelpiece, propped beside the vase of daffodils
we bought as
Tight green buds two days before, and now have opened up
a blaze of yellow.
But I want to see the picture in a better light than this;
the living room
It's in is dark, and the electric's always on. So I bring it to
the parlour — facing south,
It gets the sun from dawn to dusk. I rest it on the back of
the old overstuffed sofa

In the bay window. The muted colours suit the faded peachy pink
of the fabric.
It's a few minutes after noon and the grey drizzle of earlier
is lifting a little.
I raise the Venetian blind. A cool pearlescent light streams in.
There are textures
In the painting that I hadn't seen before. The bowl itself is
resting on
A terracotta-coloured shelf, little flecks of red in it, the left-hand
corner of the edge
Signed 'J·M' in red. Discreet. You have to look for it. Then I want
to talk about the bowl,
But I'm distracted trying to put words to the green of the wall
it's placed against.

How many shades are mingled there from pear to sage
to olive green? Now
That I look at it, is there a background hint of yellow? Then
I notice the lemon
Of our experiment that's been occupying all this time
in the parlour on
Its Moroccan saucer. We binned the banana when it went black.
As for the lemon,

It's ever so slightly beginning to shrink and wizen, but still
holding firm after
Three weeks — firmer in fact than fresh. In any event
it glows against the green
Of the wall, the earth of the shelf, and the blue and creamy white
of the bowl.

I'm wondering how Jeffrey got that illusionistic craquelure effect.
So I email him;
He emails back. 'With the surface all wet and with a small
Winsor & Newton
No. 7 sable brush (these are still licked into shape by old women —
what happens when
They die — that's it) I paint the craquelure directly into
the wet paint, then
Go to eat and watch *Newsnight* — it takes a week to dry.'
A car horn sounds.
I look out the window. It's the usual crowded parking,
morning surgery hours —
The Antrim Road Medical Centre is only five doors up
Glandore Avenue from us.

I'm often there. *Was* there earlier this morning, getting
an advance blood
For tomorrow's treatment at the City. In fact we're waiting
to be seen there now.
The neutrophils are up to par, so everything is good to go.
Here comes the nurse
With the cannula trolley. She ties the ligature, palps my lower arm
to find a vein,
Then, head down, that look of utter concentration —
Vermeer's *Lacemaker* —

As delicately, slowly, she works the needle in. *Cannula* the Latin
for a little reed,
Or maybe a pen — the needle a nib with chemo ink to overwrite
the faulty DNA.

Ninety minutes later we're out of the hospital. You call Fonacab,
90333333,
You remember when we called it the Five 3s? Forty years ago
or more . . .
The city centre's gridlocked, according to the cabbie — an ambulance
wails by —
Says he'll try the Westlink — we pass the Royal, where
four years ago
I had my cardiac procedure — triple bypass, mechanical aortic
valve — at last we
Reach the Antrim Road: past the Waterworks, and all
the cherries suddenly
In bloom! And we're both so looking forward to seeing
Jeffrey Morgan's *Hare Bowl* again.