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FOUR SIDES FULL

A Personal Essay



Gallery Books

'I love you baby and I always will
ever since I put your picture in a frame.'
— Tom Waits, 'Picture in a Frame',
Mule Variations, 1999

A frame is a practical thing (for protection)

A frame is functional (for hanging)

A frame is powerful (it adds value)

A frame is sly (it flatters)

A frame is magic (it transforms)

A frame makes itself clear.

A frame is a halo. A frame is a breach.
A frame is a no man's land.

A frame is an honour. A frame's an investment.
A frame's a proscenium arch.

A frame defines. A frame encloses.
A frame completes.

A frame declares that what's inside
is worthy of a frame.

The frame separates the artwork from the world around.
What's inside is art, what's outside is not — simple, isn't it?
As if around every experience there would be some kind of
transition, some way of saying, Prepare yourself, there will
be a crossing. So draw breath.

The image proposes an imagined world. The surrounding is
reality; it is where we are when we look at the image, the air
we breathe, the room we stand in, the wall we're allowed to

touch. The frame is the transition from imagined to real. That's
a big responsibility when you think about it. No surprise then
that the frame sometimes nudges towards excessive ornament,
as if by being too much it can at least be sure of itself.

The mount confirms it. Wiped of noise and meaning, of busi-
ness and intent, the mount is a meditative space. The mount
will see you clear. You set aside your knots of living, shed
your duties and concerns, you take a breath, dip your mind
in its clean space, to emerge on the inner side of it. You have
been prepared.

Can dimensions be conferred upon a meditative space? Call
it an inch or two of potential, of virgin territory.

The gap between painting and frame: like when the orchestra
finishes and there's a fraction of silence before applause kicks
in.

A mount in the UK and Ireland, a mat in the US, it's a *pas-
separtout* in French, a 'goes everywhere', which is also the French
term for a master or skeleton key. The defining characteris-
tic of a *paspartout* is its lack of defining characteristics.
Undecorated, undistinguished, the same mount can be used
for all different kinds of art, it goes anywhere, which I sup-
pose makes it a kind of skeleton key. Use the same mount
with different art and different frames, there's still a seam of
connection between how they look. It's not the full rhyme
of matching frames, but a much quieter and slyer half-rhyme,
a coincidence of sight, a filigree connection that the eye regis-
ters probably more fully than the mind. It's a kind of poor
man's magic trick, like tracking the same consonants or vowels
in different words, or the same shy huddle of sounds that runs
like an undercurrent through a stanza or poem, pulling the
thing together, unlocking a network of association, opening
up possible meanings as a master key would a locked room.

The mount goes everywhere but is always contained by the

stronger claims of both artwork and frame. It's a means to an end, a transaction of sorts. It holds what contains it and what it contains in equilibrium.

Not every painting requires a mount; not every frame does either. Sometimes having a mount would be like listening to an opera duet with banjo accompaniment.

The verb 'to cleave' means to split or rend apart, and also to cling or hold fast. I like a word that holds its own between opposite meanings, that can look in two directions at once and settle right at the nexus of two competing and crossed lines.

Maybe every painting that wants to be beautiful should be framed in an ugly frame.

Memory works by slapping frames around the oddest things. Rarely understated, the frames, as I get older, seem to tend towards the gaudy, the baroque. Some are black lacquer, some are mirror glass. One or two are gold, burnished and ornate (there's no accounting for taste in the end, especially when it comes to the surface of metaphor). Some shatter on the slightest impact, some are studded with sharp tacks. A few have layers of black crêpe in front. With very little sense of what comes before or after, I can recall, as if it were the second when I began to write this sentence, single moments from forty years ago, and more. Here is me in a wicker cradle with a face looming in. Here is me in the back of a rowboat, baling out water with a baby-food can. Here is me in that hospital waiting room, playing with anagrams. I could go on. It's not like a film where scenes get played in sequence, so that the reason for this scene might be found in the last. It's more like a slide show without the projector. Unless I am the projector. Unless my body is.

There is a cigar box somewhere in a storage crate with three slides from the '60s inside. You know the ones, about two

inches square with a thick card border in white, like a mini polaroid. If I hold them up to the light I will see my mother, my father, my brother and me in one of three locations: at the Alcock and Brown monument in Clifden, the Lia Fáil on the Hill of Tara or the Wellington Monument in Dublin. In two of them I will be wearing the red, blue and white candy-striped summer dress my Aunt Anna sent back from New York. (I loved that dress. As the youngest of six, clothes were valued more for being serviceable than for being smart, and that dress was probably the most colourful piece of clothes I'd ever had.) In the third we are all bundled up, my mother in a wool coat with big buttons that I swear I can *almost* smell the muffled brown of when I hold the slide up to the light. I remember nothing else of those three occasions; the slides are all there is. Year in, year out, they are in darkness. Ask me now, I'd scarcely know where I could put a hand to them. But sometime in the future, clearing a press or (God help me) maybe moving again, there will be the Café Crème box and I will open it and I will take out each slide, hold it up to a window and, sure as a director calling 'Action' or a race-gun going off, that single moment will light up, and my past, a few seconds of it framed as a slip of celluloid, and my dead parents and my young day will square up to my life.

Life: a word in which three of the letters seem to agree on a direction and the fourth has other ideas. It is practically silent, that 'e', a stowaway sheltering in the lea of the other ones. Three sides of a frame that occupy a vertical world, that see the world along the same more or less straight-up lines, and a fourth that curls round a protected space, as any life requires.

I was maybe six or seven, filling in the stretch between home from school and teatime, and I was playing outside. My mother was big on us playing outside, not *outside* in a Heathcliff and Cathy sort of way — untamed hills and folds of fields you could get lost in or encounter fairies or come back from, centuries having passed, a different child entirely.

No, outside had to be in view of the kitchen window or the back door or, at a push, outside the front door hitting a tennis ball against the gable wall, so she'd hear us within reach. I was probably larking with our old dog, Judy, or doing my best to annoy my brother but, either way, I'd have been lonely and bored, as I mostly remember being. I think I'd not yet learned to find in books the company I so badly wanted for real. I remember a lot of loitering, looking in windows of bedrooms, wondering if anything would be different seen from outside in, or if I'd catch anyone up to something. As if there were anyone to catch. But I did eke out a mystery all the same; not something happening inside rooms, but in the rooms themselves. The windows had something wrong with them: something didn't add up. From the inside the wall of the bedroom where I slept seemed to be mostly window. Likewise the room to the left of it, closest to the kitchen. These two big windows would surely have brushed almost against each other had there not been a dividing wall. Seen from the outside, however, there was a sizeable portion of wall separating them. I got my mother's measuring tape from the old Singer sewing machine. I tried to make them tally, the inside and the out, but I couldn't. There was only one possible explanation: there had to be a secret windowless room separating the two big windows, accounting for the stretch of unaccountable pebble-dash. I asked my mother what she kept in the secret room and when she told me there was no secret room I knew its contents had to be very important indeed. But what could be so secret that it had to be locked in a hidden room that my mother said didn't exist? I remember at one stage being pretty sure that it must have been another child, a very quiet child, a better child than I; a child to be sheltered from the kind of sister who failed, every day, to come rescue her. These are the kinds of knots bored children tie up their lives in: complicated knots that double back on themselves and can't be undone, even with diagrams, even with the step-by-step account of how they came to be. The secret room with the better me. The secret room with another life so precious it had to be protected from me. And

I was only six or seven. Oh, you can be very sure I filled that room with the most fanciful content known to a midland youngest child who watched a lot of TV. I imagined it, based on the logic of the measuring tape, narrow, taller than it was wide, lit with exuberant chandeliers sometimes and, other times, blacker than the inside of my mouth in the small hours, fast asleep. I imagined it filled with precious jewels, and also filled with feathers or lightning, or with a strange and eerie greyness with no memory of colour or light. I imagined it where the witch lived when she wasn't underneath my bed, waiting to grab my ankles. I imagined it New York, where my mother and her stories came from. It was a lab where gold was made by a man in a white coat who could not speak. And it was where all my new friends were waiting for me, ready to jump out and call, 'Surprise!'.

Later on when I first walked into an art gallery, in Dublin, I saw in all those high gilt frames the inside of that room. And it was like nothing I'd imagined. And it was like it all.

When you google-image a painting it almost always shows without a frame. As though all paintings could be equal, or be made to be. It's very disconcerting, like catching a female relative in some state of undress. They tend to look a little sorry for themselves, a small bit abashed.

'The four sides of a frame are among the most important parts of a picture. A painting or a drawing included in a given space ought, therefore, to be in perfect harmony with the frame . . . according to the dimensions of the room in which it is to be hung.'

— Henri Matisseⁱ

Here are styles of ornament commonly used in frames:

Lamb's tongue, guilloche, egg and dart, crocket, palmette, ogee, gesso, mortise and tenon, acanthus, raking knurl, ribbon and stick, sgraffito, gadroon, rocaille.

— Here are words that have been carved to gilded ornament. Part armour, part fancy dress, the point of the frame is

to protect and to enhance. But no armour is made from skin, whereas some frames are made from the same wood as the painted panel. In early Byzantine icons, for example, the frame is carved from the same panel as the painting, with the painted place recessed in the centre of the piece. It's a difference of depth, with the frame concerned more with the third dimension than with width or height. I wish I could do that with a poem, surround it in a depth of space. Depth could be very useful in the framing of a poem.

Inside is the poem. Outside is not. The poem's white space is a framing device. But white space is not a fashioned thing: it is negative space. The un-poem.

'Yes, I remember Adlestrop.'ⁱⁱ The Edward Thomas poem opens at a slant: something has been said or thought, and the first line is the response. What is it answering? Is there a question ('Do you remember Adlestrop?' perhaps)? From its first breath the poem is in league with another that is not heard. There is context, a world elsewhere, against which the poem is set, much as a framed picture is positioned on a wall.

That wall is our world, where we live and from where we must make a journey if we are to step over the threshold of the unheard that introduces this poem. The quietness of the poem is what we step into with relief, trailing our ever-so-busy lives, asking for a minute's peace so we can set them down like so many shopping bags and simply draw our breath. The poem stills us, just as the moment stilled Edward Thomas back on that heated late June afternoon, just as the moment was then settled by him in the four straight, hinged stanzas of the poem. The poem invites us into its carriage, there to sit and listen not only to its birdsong, but to the sweet machine of the well made poem progressing stealthily. The poem re-enacts its moment of composition: we are there, immediately, sat on that express train. That may well be me or you who has just cleared his throat.

But we must be quiet now: the poem hushes its surround-sound to listen for those birds. It begins with unheard words

and finishes in silence, as all poems do, the clatter of that blackbird and his companions fading as the train pulls out, and as the poem fades out into silent, white space and, beyond it, into busy hands that hold the book and lives that are so noisy they beg for a moment's silence now, for a moment's respite. This poem is first framed by silence, and then it is framed by noise.

We can stand in front of this framed silence and, if the frame is strong enough to take the weight, we can enter it. Perhaps every poem wants to position itself inside some frame or another; perhaps this is why it is a poem and not a piece of prose with its altogether looser arrangement with the white space of the page. Perhaps every well made poem is capable of saying to us, This is a full world. And it is up to us to measure the truth of it against the truth of our elsewhere lives.

If no white space cushioned the poem its language would have to brush up against the language of the world. The world where language buys sausages and fills insurance forms. Where it writes rejections and makes empty promises. Where it speaks in parliaments and fudges truth and sells cosmetic surgery and guns. And if there were no white space to mark it off, how would we know the difference? They are only little words. Even the innocent amongst them look like repeat offenders, like the lying sort.

'Don't play what's there,' Miles Davis said, 'play what's not there.'ⁱⁱⁱ Play the void. Play the white space. Play outside the frame.

If only there were ways of framing off the worst of our lives. Of containing it. Forbidding it to leak into the rest of our well-lived days.

Which sounds as if a frame is a high wall, keeping what's inside captive, at a safe distance. But a frame is not a wall: it cannot be. The point of a frame is that it is not-wall. It is the un-wall.