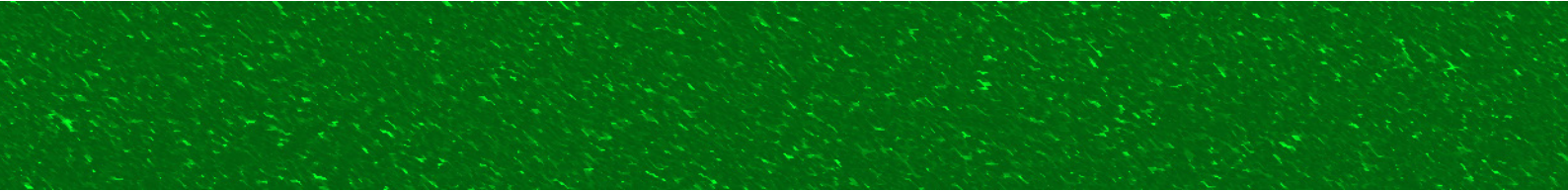
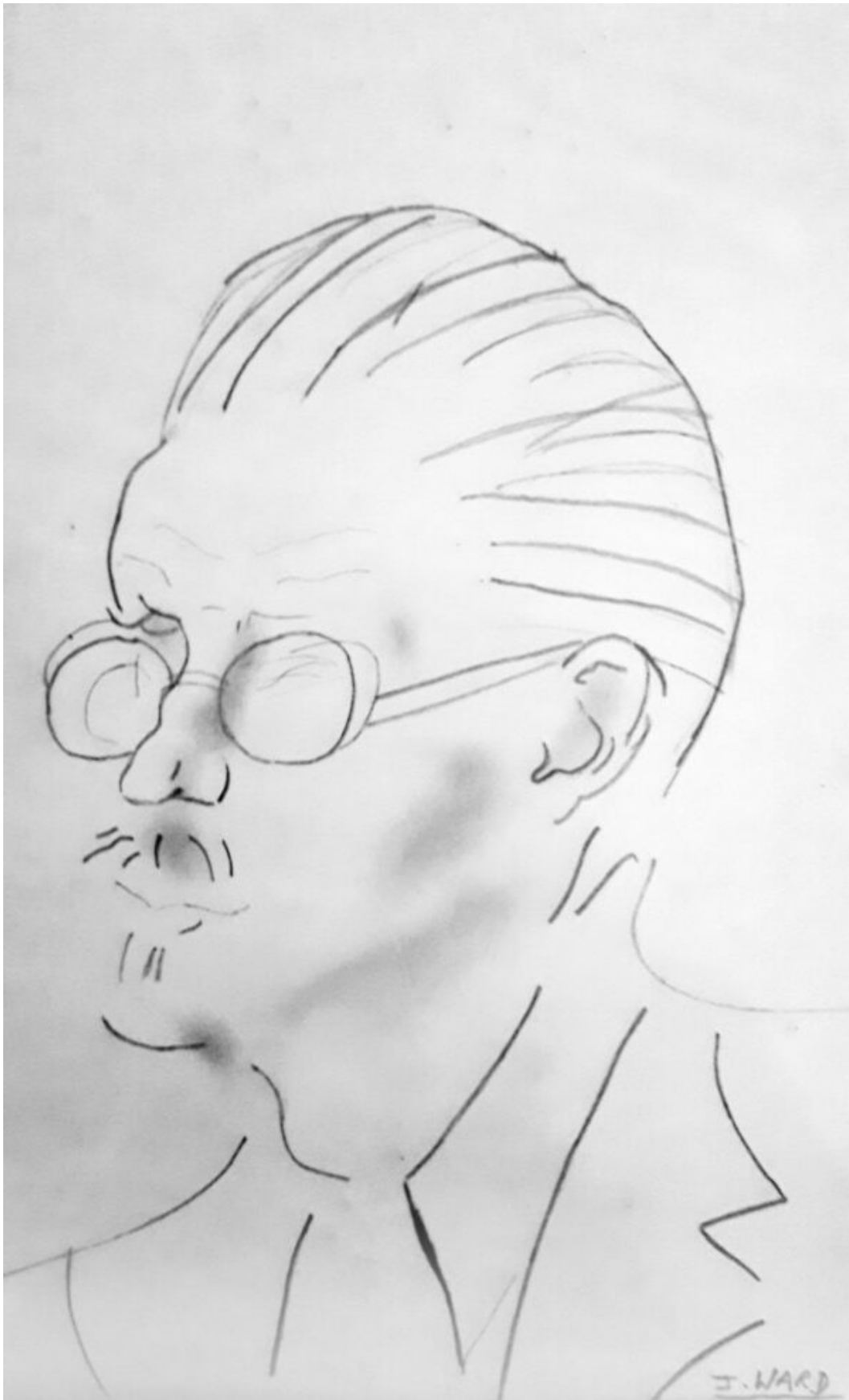


ARTE





Drawing by Jim Ward.

Bicycle Duty

Jim Ward¹

Yes. Carry me along, taddy, like you done through the toy fair!
(*FW* 628.8-9)

December sleet, visible in the arcs of silver from streetlamps, frosted through the night. An eerie silence in the streets, only the barking of the town dogs, in relay, awoken from attentive, one-eyed slumber by the crunching footsteps passing at that odd hour, grinding on cobblestones and ice, a tap-tapping from his cane.

The dogs – I’ll be glad to see the back of them – the older man thought, fingering the stones in his pockets with his left hand, his right gripping his cane. Ammunition against them; dogs were also enemies.

A younger man, wearing glasses like his father, carrying two valises on stretched arms, hurriedly packed with only essentials, walked up front like a Moses, determined.

Behind him, his mother, on one arm another valise, her other gripped the boy’s hand. The boy wheeled his bicycle along with his free hand.

A new moon obscured by cloud peeped down from the bleak sky. In a week, the midwinter solstice.

Where will we be then? She worried. Not for the first time though. Her whole life with him had been precarious, thirty-six years of it. Scrimping the meagre fees he got for lessons, relying on generous benefactors, and him spendthrift when he had it. Oh, Jim.

So, she trekked along the freezing, dark streets, following him as she had done all their shared life. This night fleeing to another country, just like they did almost forty years before. Now, a son and grandson in tow, arthritis in her bones.

A few kilometres later, they saw the sign SAINT-GÉRMAIN-DES-FOSSÉS, the small railway station. They had made it this far.

In the cramped waiting-room, welcome warmth from a cast-iron stove lifted their spirits. Nora removed gloves and lay her palms on the stove’s surface

¹ Jim Ward is an Irish writer published for poetry and stories in Irish and English in various publications. His play *Just Guff* won ‘Best in the West’ award at Galway Fringe Festival, 2017 and has toured nationally. His poetry has twice been runner-up in award categories, including the Bobby Sands Creative Writing Contest, 2021. A second play *Three Quarks* was performed live via Zoom on February 2nd 2021, Joyce’s birthday, by The James Joyce Centre in Dublin. His memoir piece *Begging from Beggars* was published in *The 32: Anthology of Irish Working Class Voices*, edited by Paul McVeigh, in 2021. Jim is also a published cartoonist.

‘I declare to God, but the weather’s turned all of a sudden.’

Jim, shuffling around, his cane tapping to mark his space, merely grunted. He barely spoke to her for months now. Wearing a long greatcoat, hat and scarf, he settled onto a hard, wooden bench.

Nora felt concerned for him, his wellbeing. Bad enough to have a daughter in a sanatorium, she could write that off to the cruelties of life. She had seen it before, as a young girl in Galway, yes, the West of Ireland had a lot of that, she knew.

Being Nora, she took in her surroundings. Three other people sat in the waiting-room; a young couple and an old man. The couple looking anxious, the old man, at his shoes.

But Jim was troubling her. Ever since the book came out, he had dried up; no conversation. Then the war started and ... now this.

Sixteen years he worked on that book, despite failing eyes, the stomach cramps and Lucia’s condition worsening. Sixteen years.

‘I never read anything he wrote,’ Nora often told people. ‘But someday I must, with all the laughing that comes from his room when he’s writing.’ Who was it to? A newspaperman, or one of all those followers who came to visit? The Paris apartment was always busy with visitors. Nora would go see a matinee. She loved Paris.

‘I’ve confirmed it with the ticket clerk,’ George announced with authority

‘The train to Geneva stops here at 3AM. It may be delayed on account of the weather though.’

‘Will mummy be there... in Geneva?’ Stephen asked.

‘Ah, it’s alright *a stór*,’ said Nora. ‘You’ll see yer mammy soon.’

‘Can I go out and ride my bicycle Nanny?’

‘Better not,’ said George, worried. ‘It’s cold and it’s late.’

‘Are you not tired Stephen?’ Nora asked, stooping down to smooth his cheeks.

‘A little.’

‘Come over here.’ Nora cupped her hand around his neck and guided Stephen over to the bench where Jim rested, nearest to the hot stove.

There was plenty of room. Only the three others waiting with them. Fellow refugees. Not many visas were approved. The clock on the wall read 2.10. It ticked slowly. They had made it this far and were on time, despite all the delays and false starts leading to this night.

George stood in front of the stove, on the balls of his feet, legs apart, both hands deep in his trouser pockets, his overcoat unbuttoned as he warmed his backside. He was

staring at little Stephen's bicycle; how useful it had been the past few weeks. All those trips on the long road, back and forth, to Vichy. I pedalled against wind on the wide open elevated French roads, only plane trees lining my way. Each journey risking me to the dangers of being conscripted – or found out.

Helen was safe in Switzerland, but even marriage to a Jew was dangerous. Once, when they were denied visas because of this, Jim had said, out of frustration:

'Jews? What next, burglars, lepers?' When they see my bank statements, they'll see I'm not Jewish.'

'Tell me a story, granddad,' Stephen said, tugging Jim's arm.

Jim's ringed, boney fingers gripped the thin cane's handle, as he sat motionless, his mind somewhere else.

'Come on, Jim,' Nora said. 'You won't speak to me at all. Tell the boy a story.'

Jim, suddenly aware of the request, seemed to snap out of his trance. He coughed, clearing his throat and, without looking at anybody, began:

'Once upon a time and a very good time it was, there was a giant, a giant Finn...'

'Finn MacCool, grandpa?' said Stephen.

'Finn again,' Jim laughed.

He was off. Nora knew him so well. It was only a couple of weeks ago he broke down crying after me getting the news from Galway about my mother – he cried more than me! Of course, his own mother... when he wouldn't kneel and pray for her as she lay there dying...

'And this giant slept, while people waked him.'

'Did they wake him, grandpa?'

'Oh yes.'

'From his sleep?'

While Jim spoke in his weak voice, Nora considered his deteriorating condition over the year. The stomach pains had got worse. She told him years ago, when they first started, to get it seen to. But Mrs Jolas and Doctor Fontaine told him it was just nerves, and he believed them; after all, I'm just a simple Galway girl, she recalled thinking.

Then, when the book came out at last, the war had broken out. The long work in progress – and nobody even understood it! I must have a read of it meself with all the effort he put into it. I never read anything he wrote, but to hear no one even understood this one...

No, Jim wasn't the best, this past while.

After the story, Jim stood up and, tapping his foot began to sing:

When M'Carthy took the floor at Enniscorthy... He knew he had the floor.

'If only ya stuck to the music, Jim.' Nora clapped along with him. By the time he had finished, all the other travellers in the room were clapping too.

'Can I go outside on my bicycle?' Stephen asked, now getting more energy after listening to his grandfather, and Jim, having finished, retreating inward again.

'No,' George said, firmly, smoking a cheroot. 'No, Stephen, it's late, stay indoors.' George was nervous.

He eyed Stephen's bicycle. How useful it had proved, how it had come to the rescue. The runs back and forth to Vichy – papers, visas stamped, passports to sort out, and all on the bicycle. Why, even the gallon of petrol needed to bring them to this quiet station, was carried on the bicycle. Yes, it had served well.

The news he had received a month ago worried him. 'Jews?' Alright, Helen yes – Stephen's mother. And Jim's reaction.

'What about Helen?' Nora had asked.

'She's safe, across the border. In Switzerland.'

'She'll be the death of us yet.'

George sucked his cheroot compulsively.

This could be dangerous. Then, there was his avoiding conscription. George chuckled through puffed, tight-lipped cheeks 'A Jew?' How ironic – Bloom – Papa's best-known character; yes, how ironic.

One of the other travellers in the room, the old man, sneezed. George looked. The man wore old large boots and had a tattered suitcase. George recognised him as the elderly man he had seen around Saint-Gérard-le-Puy selling shoelaces and haberdashery.

Then, he noticed the other two, a couple in their twenties, George guessed, they kept looking around, alert like sparrows and the woman spoke only in whispers to the man.

George scrutinized his pocket watch, the clock ticking away on the wall then stamped out his cheroot. Jim, who knew how to hold a cigarette correctly, puffed away to himself in the corner.

The railway official entered, wearing a kepi, jacket and waistcoat with watch and chain.

'*Excusez-moi, Monsieur*, is our train still on schedule?'

'*Oui, Monsieur*, 3 AM.'

The official looked about the waiting room, taking in everybody, with a concerned look. Nora copped it. She darted a glance at Jim, who simply stared at the warm stove.

‘The train arrives in five minutes. On time.’

When he left again, Nora slyly looked at the others in the waiting room. She could sense something. They never met her look. True, these were worrying times, but the best camouflage in the forest is to blend in, not to wish yourself invisible.

A piercing whistle blew.

‘Train to the Swiss border, to Geneva, via Aix-Les-Baines, now arriving.’

‘Good,’ said George, readying his luggage.

‘Come on Jim, let’s go.’ Nora went to get Jim up.

‘Come on? Where the devil are you taking me?’ he asked comically, his tongue visible.

The whole waiting room stood up, relief at last.

‘Papers please, *Mesdames* and *Messieurs*,’ an educated voice called out.

Two men, wearing broad brimmed hats, had entered along with a Vichy policeman.

George reddened, blowing air from his cheeks, and fumbled in his pockets acting like a man who had lost his car keys. He was carrying the passports.

One of the men grinned as he waited for him patiently, blocking his way. The train wouldn’t stop here for long, George knew.

The other man examined the young couple’s papers methodically, asking them to recite dates of birth and why they were leaving. His accent was German.

George produced three passports and three travel visas for Switzerland. The man, standing in front of him, studied these, examining front and back carefully.

Two days ago, George had to get the American chargé d’affaires in Vichy to extend their expired British passports; Helen being not just Jewish but also an American. He had used the bicycle to travel there, despite not being allowed to leave Saint-Gérard, risking arrest.

The man handed him back the passports, looking official. Holding the visas up to him, the man said, ‘You realise these run out at midnight tomorrow?’

‘*Oui, chef*,’ George replied, nodding he understood.

Nora, holding Jim’s arm, waited anxiously.

The man gave George the documents and raised a finger to his brow; a salute.

‘That’s fine, *Monsieur*.’ He stood out of their path. George felt relief.

The whistle blew sharply again. The train was on the verge of departing.

The party filed out towards the platform. The young couple had already boarded.

‘HALT!’ came the sharp voice.

George froze. Looking around, they saw the man who sounded German, grip the

old man by the lapels. It reminded Jim of a scene from Clongowes all those years ago. The old man was muttering how he'd be late for his train.

'You're going nowhere, Isaac,' said the German. The policeman moved in to restrain the old man.

'Come on,' said George, moving.

'Papa, my bicycle!' Stephen said in English.

Everybody looked at him. Nora felt the blood leave her face.

Jim, with the same freedom from tension he used to feel after getting absolution in confession when young, let out also in English:

'Yes, boy, your wingèd chariot.'

The German pushed back his hat. 'Well, well,' he said smiling. 'What have we here?'

The other man spoke to him low, in German. The German nodded, understanding, then stood aside to let them pass.

The station official ushered them onto the platform, the engine shot steam ready to pull out. As they left the waiting-room, passing the old man in the policeman's grip, he was still looking at his boots sniffing. Nora could hear sobs.

The first man saluted again with a finger. 'Farewell to Monsieur James Joyce, the great Irish writer.'

Hearing this, Jim thought he'd never be so glad to be Irish.

The cold air hit them as soon as they landed outside. Offset by warm shoots of steam from the engine firing back along the platform. Smokey smells from the furnace in the clear winter night brought Jim back to *his* Dublin.

They quickly stepped on board. The official helped them with the suitcases.

'*Monsieur*.' He sounded concerned again.

What now? thought Jim, does he want a tip?

'The bicycle. You realise there is a duty to be paid to bring it over the border?'

'I... we... have no money.' Jim looked at George.

'I'm sorry, *Monsieur*'

'Can't we?'

The official shook his head.

'I'm afraid the Swiss won't allow it.'

'We'll leave it so.' said George.

'But Papa, my bicycle.' Stephen started to cry.

'Shush *a stór*,' said Nora.

‘I’ll buy you a brand new one in Zurich.’ George promised him.

As Nora led tired Stephen sobbing onto the train, she recalled all the previous moves to cities across Europe and Jim’s own family’s dislodgements across Dublin in his youth; this would be the last, she knew it.

George’s palm traced the saddle of the bicycle left on the platform. He wanted to ‘pat’ it one last time to express his gratitude like a family pet he was leaving behind. As the train shunted off, he looked back, watching it gradually disappear smaller in the distance and the darkness, and the world they had known passing into memory.

