They came first in fragments, dark and incoherent. He cannot even rightfully call them thoughts. They are wordless impulses, rather, like those of a child who has not yet developed the ability to use language and syntax as a mode of reasoning. His is a nebulous world where sentences are not spoken, they are felt; where discordant harmony and dying color swallow him, immersing him in the silence of the impelling force that drives his chaotic reality to oblivion.

Then something changes.

Understanding brings light to the face of the deep and with it realization of physical pain and agony beyond all he has ever imagined. It is music, this pain, a song that is fading and moving towards a finality that is not unlike the tragic conclusion of a great journey or a secret tryst. It is an unfinished symphony that promises bloody cessation without peaceful resolution.

It is the unforeseen end.

He does not try to speak. His throat is broken and can yield no sound, but even if he could force the words to cry out for help, who would hear? It occurs to him then that his ears pick up no audible sounds in this lonely place and that his eyes, open or closed, can see only blackness. Numbness encroaches upon his shattered body and ordinary sensation becomes only a confusion of anguish and absence as his nerves— little by little—ignite into searing flames and then die altogether.

Blood from deep inside the fountain of his being
bubbles like boiling copper in his mouth; that sensuous flavor of both long life and the grave giving and giving of its essence seeping out onto the sand and grit beneath him.

The sand. Yes, the sand. He feels himself clutching the a cold wet handful grasping not for the granules themselves, but for those last precious seconds of life that each grain represents. It is all he can do to keep this mangled hand from letting the salty wind take what little time he was left.

He chases his thoughts now, their fading trail like wet footprints on hot pavement and struggling with all this is left of his mind to remember how things came to be this way. How he came to be dying in this sad place. It demands of him every last bit of concentration just to flex his brain and to direct those electric currents to send to his mind’s eye those memories…those memories. He needs so desperately to piece together the grand puzzle of his impending death.

For a brief time, he sees clearly those last moments of life before this. It is less a memory, really, than a confidential glimpse into the past of a stranger. He can relate nothing to the images shown to him which was perhaps the most disturbing particular part yet. It seems to indicate that his mind has been harmed irreparably, but the memory is the anchor to which he holds fast. He does the best he can with the faint scene given to him.

Lush green grass quivers like thousands of frightened children as the darkening sky stirs in eager awakening. Powerful gusts of Atlantic air send cold rain blowing against a stone tower far off in the distance. Meanwhile, a weak thought in his head fights and tries to gather a voice. It tells him to turn back around and leave this place while he still can. While the cleansing rain still has a hope of changing his mind.

Changing his mind? What is he thinking?

He does not know.
The name of this beautiful place begins to form into a word. He could make sense of this word if his mind would only make the proper connections and it almost does, but then something interferes; be it a synaptic misfire or an untimely release of chemicals in his brain. The word slips away. Simultaneously, the fragile picture of the green grass and the stone tower makes way for yet another scene, something wholly unexpected.

He might have forgotten her face entirely. He might have fallen into the realm of the dead without remembering her red dress on this day of days. She, his dearest one, his beloved wife.

They are surrounded by a host of friends and family in a rose adorned banquet hall. Open windows look out on a glistening nighttime bay and a live band plays those songs that bring them back through time to the beginning of everything worth cherishing. Above the stage, a white silk banner hangs lavishly from the ceiling bearing in curvy black letters the words, “20 Beautiful Years.”

He and his radiant wife move to the music, swooning in this moment that is theirs. They twirl and spin about the dance floor in a desperate embrace. Their feet float on melody traveling through glittering lights.

“Will you give me twenty more years?” He asks her.

He twists and turns her then, around and around. She falls laughing into his arms while happy faces applaud in warm approval of their love, tried and true.

“I already gave you a son,” she says. Her red dress slides through his fingers feeling strangely like sand.

“You gave me the best son in the world,” he says. “And all I gave you was my lousy life.”

She looks at him, her golden hair hanging in front of her eyes like the veil of some crimson-clad bride, and he wants to tell her then and there that every day has been a
wedding. And that every moment has been a honeymoon and that the coming years only hold promises of European summers and tropical winters; of fireside wine drinking and splendid walks down the lane; of grandchildren and more grandchildren and of long days and pleasant nights. But it has been twenty years and he doesn’t have to tell her. She knows.

He looks into her eyes blue eyes then and he can feel it before it happens. It is that curious brand of uncertainty that occurs when one suddenly realizes that they are dreaming. It is that sense of displacement that covers all things before the inevitable waking; the inexorable jaunt from one reality to the next.

And then she is gone.

From his mouth, a stream of bloody vomit erupts onto the sand and somewhere near him—maybe only inches away—waves collide with rocks in a battle that will never be won. He is wracked by fits of coughing that drown out the sound of the cold, shrieking wind and he realizes with some measure of happiness that he can hear again.

What he hears, above the screaming wind and the hungry waves, is the sound of something ringing. The sound is familiar and as it grows louder making its way ever nearer to where he lies. He remembers that it is his personal phone.

“Hello?”

The voice on the other end—her voice—says, “Come home, love.”

He is back in the grassy field, walking away from the stone tower into the tempest towards some unknown destination.

“I have something to do,” he says to his wife. “I won’t be much longer.”
“I love you,” she says. “So much.”

“I know.”

He drops the phone into the grass then and leave it behind as he walks toward some place that holds significance. Some place he cannot yet remember. He wants to tell himself not to go. He wants to tell himself that his every step is ordered but with each footfall he draws ever closer to this place of rocks and broken bones. But most of all, he wants to tell himself to pick the phone up from off the wet grass and tell his sweet wife how deeply and immensely he loves her. How much he cherishes her company. How dear she is to him and how fast he’ll be on the next flight home to hold her again.

“Daddy, will you tell me a story?”

The words come from the sky, from all around the darn beach and suddenly he is in a sunny place holding his son’s little hand in his own. The two walk down a wooded path. Sunlight spills through the leaves above and warm winds bring to them flowery scents from the river ahead.

“What kind of story do you want me to tell?”

The little blond boy thinks to himself for a moment, stopping in the middle of the path to do so. “Daddy, I want a story about a tree that grows blue apples and a man with a sharp sword.”

He smiles down at his precious son.

“Well, it just so happens that I know one story like that,” he says. “It is about a secret tree that grows in a secret garden in a place nobody has ever seen. People don’t talk about this place anymore, but they did long ago because they knew that the secret tree grew very special fruit.”

“Blue apples!” the boy says.

“That’s right. Now, what people heard was that if
you are the fruit, you would live forever. You’d never grow old and never die. So, everybody all over the world—kings, beggars, warriors, and even little boys like you—began to search for this garden, but what nobody knew was that if you found the garden, you also found the man with the sword who lives there.”

“Is he bad?” The boy asks.

“Some people thought so. They’d say that he doesn’t want to let people live forever and if he catches you trying to get to the secret tree, he’ll kill you with his sword. It doesn’t matter if you’re young, old, big, or small. It’s the same for everyone who tries to go there.”

“The boy’s face twists itself into the most sorrowful expression.

“When am I going to die, Daddy?”

His son’s question surprises him. Had the story been as serious as that? It was simply going to be an adventure tale—featuring a certain little blond boy—like always, but the sadness in the boy’s face is terrible. He wants an answer. The man holding the boy’s little hand stumbles for some explanation for mortality, some way to make death okay, but luckily the boy has already moved on.

“If we find the secret garden before we get to the river, I’ll go first, the boy says. “And when the man with the sword is telling me to leave, you can sneak up behind him and knock him out. We’ll make sure to get one apple for you, one apple for me, and one apple for mommy.” He lifts his son up and puts him on his shoulders.

The fevered hallucination of this day begins to grow dark with every step, but he remembered that their afternoon at the river had been warm and they had laughed a lot. Hadn’t he stepped on a stray fisherman’s hook buried in the pebbles at some point before they’d gone home? Or had that been the little boy?
He could not recall.

When the green wood fades away, he finds himself far from that long ago time of little boys and storytelling. He hugs his song, only the boy is a grown man now. A church organ blasts an old ceremonial tune and an enchanting young woman in an ornate white wedding gown joins the father and son in a tight embrace.

“I wish I could have given you more,” he says to his song and his new bride. “Please tell me that it’s enough.”

The man before him is smiling so brightly, so like the boy he once had been.

“Dad,” he begins. “You’ve given us so much. Even if you had only been able to send us on a honeymoon to the movie theater, instead of Europe, I’d still be grateful. I’m lucky to have this woman as my wife and blessed to have you and mom. I don’t need anything more than that.”

He’d always known how his son felt, but the words brought tears regardless.

“We’re naming the baby after you,” his gorgeous daughter-in-law says. “Would you like to meet him?” She hands him a pink newborn freshly wrapped in soft hospital blankets. He knows that the baby isn’t supposed to be here on this wedding day. He would be born more than a year later, around Christmas, but it doesn’t much matter.

Let the baby stay. Let him see this meaningful day as it had happened all those years ago. Let him see the bright church and hear his parents’ wedding vows. Let him see his father and mother walk out of the church doors into the throng of loving friends and family who greeted them as a married couple for the first time. Let him watch as the Catholic side of the family sets up a well-stocked bar inside the reception hall knowing full well that there would be no alcohol after that Protestant wedding.

The man living out his last few moments of life
thousands of miles and several years away, smiles for the first time since regaining consciousness at this vivid memory. He feels profound joy even as he remembers where he is and what very likely had happened to him.

“We honeymooned here almost thirty years ago, remember?” His wife says, her voice just above a whisper in his ear.

“I remember now,” he says, although he is not sure that he is actually speaking aloud.

“Your cousins said you had family in Galway, but when we went to the addresses they gave us we found out that no relative of yours had even lived in Ireland for the last twenty-five years.” He shared.

“The hotels were better than staying with strangers, anyway.” She says, as he smells her fruity perfume over the astringent air.

“The one at Rossnowlagh Beach was nice.” He concluded.

“Too many surfers,” she answers. “And besides, Rossnowlagh isn’t anywhere near here. We’re in County Clare. At the Cliffs.”

“This was my favorite place of the trip,” he says. “Of all our trips.”

“Why did we never come back here then? We traveled a lot, but never back here.”

“I don’t know. We’re here now, though. That’s all that matters.” He breathed.

“Do you want to walk back to the tower?” she questioned. “Maybe get out of this rain?”

“I can’t, love,” he starts. “I’m hurt.”

“Honey, what happened?”
“Do you remember the really bad picture you took of me at the edge of the cliff?”

She laughs, “You mean the one we took after drinking almost a whole bottle of bourbon? The one with my finger in half the frame?”

“That’s the one.”

“What about it?” She asks.

“I went back to that same spot today,” he says, “and I think I fell.”

“Oh my God!” She says. “Baby, are you okay?”

“I don’t think so,” he says. “I can’t move and I can’t feel anything at all.”

“That’s a seven hundred foot drop,” she begins. “How can you be alive?”

“The rocks broke my fall,” he says, laughing. “If I’d fallen just about anywhere else, I’d have been swept out to sea. I’m actually quite lucky. It’s a miracle.”

His wife stats crying at this.

“We were supposed to talk all the grandkids to the lake this summer,” she says. “They haven’t even seen the cabin.”

‘Tell them about me,” he says. “Don’t let them forget that I loved them very much.”

“They know you love them, honey,” she says. “You tell them all the time.”

“I just don’t want to be forgotten,” he says. “That’s what I’m scared of the most.”

She is silent for some time and when she speaks again, her voice is happy.
“You lived a very good life, sweetie. You had a wife who never stopped loving you even for a moment. You raised a boy who grew up to be a good family man with kids of his own. You worked a fulfilling job that provided well for us, even when others weren’t so fortunate. You traveled all over the world. You helped the sick, the poor and the sad. Over your life, you made many friends who would have fallen off that cliff in your place if they could have. If you die here today, you can die knowing that you lived a life worth living. You can die proud of yourself, my love.”

The broken man smiles even as he finds himself standing all too near the massive cliff’s unprotected edge bearing witness to the last piece of the puzzle. Above him, dark clouds churn and deathly winds holler. Hundreds of feet beneath him, the ocean inhales and exhales against the rocks. He feels dizzy and lightheaded, yet unusually calm and resolved.

“I’m so sorry, baby.” The man says though a steady stream of tears. “Please forgive me.”

The moment of truth is quick and drama free. He doesn’t think a second thought about it and before even the thought of regret cross his mind. He and the darkness of impact meet together on the rocks.

The dying man begins to weep his very last tears.

“Why?” he says, still very much in darkness. “Why did I do it?”

His wife’s voice is gentle and caring. “It doesn’t matter, love.” She whispers. “Let’s just lie here together and before long, we’ll forget that any of this ever happened.”