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**“The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new”**

**A poet off-duty**

**Samuel Beckett relaxes on holiday in an open-necked shirt, shoulder satchel, bare feet, and sandals.**

Of course, there's no reason to think an author has to be anything like his characters. And in any case, you shouldn't have preconceived ideas of what people are going to look like. But as it happens, our mental image of Samuel Beckett was very different: a sharply hewn face, lined with traces chiselled by time and deep thought, a proud nose, a clear-eyed, severe gaze, and a gunmetal shock of hair – what Max Ernst once called “the impressive architecture of his head”. We know all these features from the familiar series of dramatically lit black-and-white images that stage the author against the backdrop of a Paris street, a study piled high with books, or a European theatre. More than just photographs (let alone snapshots), they are pictorial homages to the author's aura.

Which is precisely what makes François-Marie Banier's photographs so striking: Samuel Beckett casually ambling along in a colourful holiday setting. The poet of silence is enjoying a stroll through Tangiers in 1978, wearing shorts and sandals without socks. Wearing an open-necked shirt and with a satchel slung over his shoulder, he stalks along the waterfront promenade like a heron, past women in veils and stalls selling fruit. He chats to his wife. The couple's casual intimacy is charming; tanned copper by the Moroccan sun, they stand on the kerb peering for gaps in the traffic.

The pictures evoke an aspect of the poet's personality absent from the severe black-and-white images we are all familiar with. The wrinkles that we fondly imagine have been etched into his face by deep, painful thoughts become shining laughter lines. Maybe the bright, metallic sun of Tangiers has reminded him of the opening line of his first novel: "The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new". Although by the 1970s, Beckett was only writing fragmented bodies for the stage – characters restricted in their movements, empty, malfunctioning hulks – his long legs remind us that here is a man who was once a college boxing champion, a brilliant cricketer, and daredevil motorcyclist.

The final photographs from Tangiers show Beckett as a kind of Giacometti sculpture of a man walking alone on the beach, growing smaller as he vanishes into the horizon. At one point he stops to gaze at a young man dribbling a football. When Handke asked him what he watched on TV, Beckett answered with a grin – football!

The photographer François-Marie Banier writes in his brief introduction that when he encountered Samuel Beckett on that waterfront promenade in 1978, he had no idea of his identity – he was simply struck by the man's heron gait and angular, striding figure. The two became friends, remaining in touch until Beckett's death. The final images in the book are black-and-white photographs from late summer 1989, a few months prior to Beckett's death, taken in the retirement home he moved into following his wife's death. It is a tiny, cell-like room, holding nothing but a bed, a table, and a chair. Here we once again recognise Beckett's powerful aura. He is lanky, even gaunt; his huge owl's eyes peer out from behind thick glasses, but his posture remains straight as a ramrod.

Alex.

(Translation by Susan Pickford)