

Terry McDonagh

A World Without Stone

New And Selected Poems

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For Seán

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I.
New Poems

A Journey Home!

From the deck of the Prince Of Scandinavia,
the banks of the Elbe are flat: a narrow strip
includes the river, its bank and the tree tops.
Houses shaped out of story books
peer over the dykes and there is one white
and silent lighthouse sheep-grazed up to its door.

There are no cleavages in gnarling rocks for breezes
to weave and sway through – not here.
Nor does the land rise even to a hiding place
in blue cold or white heat. Further up
in Husum or St. Peter Ording, the sea rolls
out and out and in – halted only by its own
gasping. Sea birds and land birds always
eat busily there, as if not sure of the tides on
the great flat prairies of mud.

White horses have been seen and men lost
cursing the goddess for a handful of shells
or a short cut to an island. The winds do come,
heaving walls of black and brown cloud and
sometimes next morning, whole bits of land
have been tossed from one place to another;
helpless as a bad prayer.

We docked
in our city or theirs, and I drove the streets
seeing men and women drink beer and coffee
standing – not the Irish way, but valid
in a sacred way known to Hamburg and
more and more to me. Again I think
of the mud-flats and the trees straining away
from the North Sea wind and my own knees
bent by Irish prayer.

I am as far away
as the stories I listened to as a child.

Kasseler Hills

It's not the time of year
for a green linnet to sing,
but I know one
must be singing devout song
somewhere in the hills near Kassel.
It's what you'd expect here
in the way you'd expect to find
a hook for a hat in a well-worn home.
Mine sings –
with the energy of colours
while the hills roll
round an abandoned water tank
in their autumn coats; quiet
as a weak defence,
– just one note
in the clean air, like a traveller
hearing an old man's joy.

The Sculptor

On my way up to the top
of a great mountain, I met
an old man with deep grey eyes
and skin like a spent drum.

It was autumn. He'd spent
most of his life cutting stone,
he said. We stood listening.
He looked like one who'd left
the crowd in his youth and gone
to the mountain to shape it
into lonely pieces. He'd begun
with music; composing notes
from the straining wind in
scrub and low-sized bushes.
Later, he felt the tug of
the hard anxiety in stone.

He did leave in his young
and lanky days, but the burden
of returning to the blue and grey
sang him home.

When a black cloud unveiled
the full moon, there were
raging sculptures everywhere.

Coming Back To Dublin

I was in a taxi coming from the airport
into Dublin, listening to the driver
pinching the silence out of finished sentences.

To snatch a bit of bliss, I harboured a thought
for the sister who had left me, near an altar
in Drumcondra, with nothing on me

but a few pence for wax candles and
the pitiful gaze of a virgin with child.
I slipped out the side door without a bean

or even an excuse to my name. It was Friday.
Later that evening, I cried a good deal
on her breast and vowed never to leave

my own people. I didn't see her again, nor
did I see the gay man who filled me with drink,
promising me a one-way ticket to London.

I let slip I was a poet and he told me of
a golden eagle he'd seen close to the sun.
I said good luck, put my pages away,

burned up a bit and had my next smoke
abroad. On my third signal, I met a big woman
in a half-empty theatre in Soho.

She wrapped me in swaddling clothes and
laid me in a manger. She had a house with
acres by the score and I kept her to myself

for many a year, till she spied a warrior
on the horizon. He said he'd burned
his thumb on a fish . She was impressed.

I headed for Dublin when she promised to
nurse him back to health.

The taxi driver was still hard at it. I told him
about my poetry. His mother had once loved
a man in verse. Are you really a poet?

Sort of I said, but in reality I'm a therapist
on the blink. He stopped outside a hospital
saying poetry was a scourge.

The Blush Goes With It

Clowns chip down to the stone,
to the last straw where
a carnal deed is not enough.

A ballet dancer raised
his hand and threw a shadow
beyond the light; his best move.

A cluster of three hazelnuts fell
when shadows and clouds had
taken on the right texture.

I remember salmon jumping waterfalls
on their way to their spawning beds
and I couldn't dance a simple dance.

A World Without Stone March '98

There are no hills and the only rock
of substance – a sixty ton granite
colossus – has been discovered
deep under the earth by a great digger
boring back under the Elbe.

It was transported here by moving ice
during an ice age, the newspaper says
and it will be put on show for one and
all.

This absence of rock has troubled me
through the years. I'd love to find
worry-stones in different shapes,
or even a handful of pebbles, but
sand is soft here. I've had to accept
this, as I've had to accept that stones
in shop windows are proper stones.
Not that I've wanted to. But people
talk of size, shape and healing power
and I feel I should too – perhaps!

I have known the need for death
and depend on solace and hard colours
for comfort and some foothold.

Saturdays

For Seán

Saturdays – nicely tucked away
into the end of the week –
are full days when Sean and I revel in
the blue and naked streets of Eimsbüttel
– and one basketball corner to the next.
You and me against the rest! and later,
we have curry, chop-suey,
the same biscuits, drinks and time
after smaller ones have taken their noises home.
What kind of things did you get up to
in school? We grow closer. He tells me
a dumb-blonde joke, but keep it to yourself!

Die Sportschau begins at ten. We plan
a longer route to get us there on time.
We pass fallen angels and smoking pubs
with names like Zum Billigen Egon or
Endstation. I learn new Hamburg slang,
see people with kick me hanging on
to them like half whispers and
we remember a crowd gathered round a
mangy dog with a foreign child left
to its own devices.

Newgrange Megalythic Tomb

It had been a hump for years,
a lovers covert on the side next to the sun,
a sandpit, a quarry, a hilltop
for Meath Indians; never a stop-off
between Knock and Lourdes –

even Francis Ledwidge
left it to be grazed by nimble calves
and to the antics of whins and thistles.

After some digging had been done
winter solstice crept in to warm
very old spirits in their own place.

They stumble about among deserving stones,
wet-kissing them
as long neglected loved ones would –

a potent people merging, like a lovely daughter,
with our jaded light and the river flowing past.

Still Life On A Corner

There's a kiosk under a big tree
on the corner of a quiet street, where
a woman, down on herself, is smoking.

She doesn't see far off any more, but
shuts her eyes and hears echoes of a family
in a much too distant land.

A man in a wheelchair curses questions of time
and the coming and going of cigarette smokers.
He drinks his reserves when the air is too hard.

A younger person sifts through worn-out raindrops.
He counts from where he stands to the end
of his secret. There are banknotes hanging out to dry!

The big tree is nourished from below and
its leaves hang fat and happy. Now in summer,
it has much to give; in winter much less.

These people return each day, as history does
to paper – unaware of what's in store for them.

Still life on a corner.

A New Sadness

The rocks are bright and wild.
They've always been there,
playing to the dead and to the

living

who left with nothing, but
the violin strings they'd wed
from between the desolate clefts.

The old cottages fell in
like a last great pagan
and the people dreamt

in cities

of wind roaring music into turf.

It's a mute place now. There are
no trees to teach daytrippers
the way
to pluck tunes among the rocks.

Come On Down God!

Farewell to loving in nooks
and crannies on feastdays!
I might as well be a monk
I thought, but didn't know
that he who laughs last
laughs loudest.
I was done with dancing.

I could be a saint!
One to show love after war,
face into the wind at night
when looking for a forlorn child,
or the embrace of a lost generation.
There was a promise of goats
and herbs in abundance,
far from the airfield. I thought
sisters were out of reach, so
I promised to sing The Messiah,
in all its parts, for a virgin
who believed in love.

I got to know the tilt of a full moon
and the hidden stroke of a warm drink.
What shape's your phone? she'd ask
again and again, knowing
the monk in me was in the city;
away from the bustle of goats and
herbs, but just inside the bars of
a high hotel window

Splash!

A Visit To Thoor Ballylee

This visit was better. I didn't go in.
Instead, I got my head well down
into the shallow water among the swans.
I couldn't drown, so I swam a bit.
A proud swan ducked. I ducked as well
and saw silver fish darting about,
vibrant as echoes in a great house.
There were shadows at the tower gate.
I could hear lots of clapping;
the kind of clapping you might hear
if a virgin appeared to the faithful.
A new harvest moon drew over long
enough to polish the water. It grew late.
The light in the tower window
was put out. I heard the singing of
calm beauty and turned my face up
to the fog-falling quiet.

Lismirrane National School

For my mother Úna

These days, I tune into radio this and that
on my way to school and hear tales of
Intel's golden braids on Irish meadows.

But I well remember the fifteen minutes
to Lismirrane, now become Othmarschen
via Kieler Strasse and a bit of Autobahn.

I would run that road past neighbours and cousins,
not to be late – especially in winter
when we had to bring firewood.
I knew the good hedges and bracken
that snapped in frost or rain
and how to tie brambles with scutch.

From the back of our house, you could see
the school, the school hill, the crossroads
and the line of fields in between
divided by stone fences, barbed wire or
unresolved feud; people knew a lot about each other.

At the crossroads, I'd melt into the crowd
pouring from other roads and fields,
each of us clinging to a bouquet of little sticks.
Some were crying at the school gate.

This week-end, I am here in Denmark
to visit Hamlet's castle at Kronborg.
Down the coast, Karen Blixen's laid to rest
in her own sanctuary under an oak tree.

I've learned a lot since Lismirrane.

Nettle Bait

When a jackass got past the zookeeper
and into the zebra section, he stiffened.
Beautiful! taking up eye-to-eye fluttering
with a really stripey specimen who helped him
with the gate. He was no romantic, yet
without as much as a towel to cover
his nakedness, he kept one ear to the wind.
It was her first time, she said. He knew
that tune and did what he could: he flashed
her a sheepish smile and dropped
a bunch of strong nettles on her hay.
He was paler this time passing the keeper
with his head hanging low to hide his grin.

That evening in a bar called The Straying Nag
he moved among stallions – real studs; strident
and huddled. What! they do it for a few nettles.
Old jacks – out on grass, rushed back in and
trotted off to Africa with their tails high.
They took bridle bits, a few worn-down shoes
and lots of exotic bait with them. Bring back a
zebra was the motto: a young thing with a full
set
of stripes. To be fair, they did promise

a life of Reilly with greener grass on
the other side and the usual bouquet of stingers.

Meanwhile, the first jackass had left his mark:
a donkey female-cross with zebra legs.

In a year, she was trendy; a funky young thing;
a new strain to compete with mules for

prime street corner spaces. Some, full of
dark resentment and brooding, moved indoors.

They lashed, kicked and half brayed to a kept diet.

The older asses went again and again, till they
ran out of puff and were replaced – the business
had become full-blown and sleazy.

There were fashionable young things
that found their way into fairy woods
with music-sprinkled air, but most of them stayed
down on the boulevards nibbling nettles.

The Shift

Maybe it was your picture
of a boatman on a lake

that made me look inwards
and not out to galaxies

where dreams are stars –
eclipses are closer to home.

I need more twilight now
to shut down on bustle,

to shift tighter with people
among stacked cups

and a place to lie down
near an open window.

The Depth Of Blood

The host does not dance with refugees
in his home, nor does he feel their solitude.
They must promise to be good;
not to unpack; never to forget the homeland
and the shame of deserting untidy fields.
Only the guilty tell tales and talk
when the moon is out and running
along windows of blue roses!

You cannot stay!

Washed up men, full of hard submission,
stand motionless on the pier.
Women, with dissolving eyes, no name
and a flower to grace every cobblestone,
must hide away till nightfall, when they
drape pot-bellied men with a glow like fireflies.
They keep their minds on whistling bridges
and talking stones they knew, before
the depth of blood drove them away.

This is a time for weaning away
from lovely things.

To be taken to a strange place with
wet confetti underfoot
and little chance of return to a promise
made by a school gate when the wind blew
gently –
 before and after love in a meadow.

Driving Past London

For Joanna

Recently, I felt a heartbeat
throb like a drumbeat
and the whole day was full.
I fiddled about with muse song
to no avail. I saw you move
through the streets, in black,
in and out of the sun and
into shadows – strange as new love.
You seemed lithe,
a missing young wind in feathers.
With every step,
you dropped a tone
on the pavement, till
an orchestra, full as a metaphor,
had gathered round you.
I drove on, away past London,
to a place where night would come.

Song Without End

I can still hear
an old violin's impulse to grieve,
the fall of a few worn-out berries
and a time when I dared not
speak my few half-cropped
poems –

Amen!

A Full Moon In Torremolinos

Mary knew a full moon in Torremolinos
was risky, but with a first draft
in her bones, she put up the chairs,
set the wildlife free and was well
on her way, before her husband's corpse
could be removed from the sandpit.

She was in The Jolly Bull with pen and paper
– doing it all for its own sake, after
a hard landing in Malaga. Even if her husband
weren't found, he'd have a reasonable chance
with his maker and she would try to finish
the poem she'd been letting herself in for
since conception. She placed only one tequilla
next to her page and focussed on a great line.

She could hear the spirits hunting
through the first draught in her veins,
and she was quickly adrift on a great leaf;
almost totally forgetting her older German lover's
last words: with tequilla, you warm inside
and wear a hat outside. She checked her
list of buttons and finished her first proof
to her total satisfaction.

Mary was thinking of God

when a man, in uniform, floated another of the same
into that empty space reserved for the memory
of her dead mother. She wrote grave and visit
just as a second man – a man versed in quarries
and looking every bit the bulldozer,
power-walked past a centre-back, as if
he were on sick leave from a football stadium.

I've still got some duty-free
and ample time for a fine line, said she
stretching out on the beach under her
Virgo sign. We have the sand all to ourselves
and there's a digger picking me up at cockcrow,
said he, long after he'd sinned no more.
She kept her mind on more global things
but sand still got in her hair
and her pyjama bottoms were on their last legs.

Next morning, after the full moon had
left its toll, he told her he was the risen Christ,
resurrected from a sandpit in the west of Ireland.
She considered putting her final draft on ice.

Other Demons

The best gifts one could give a boy
– it was felt –

were:

how to profit from a fighting cock,
silence a virgin's lament, or walk
to the city with the ease of a great dancer.

It would never be his duty to unstrap
a brace of poems near a marketplace, or
preach freedom from high sand dunes.

Women and children on foot
were to remain soundless in place,
walking to one side with tattered baskets.

On his death bed, black sloe seeds
could fall from his heart
into the lap of his faithful mistress.

He would not have seen the colour
of wet leaves, nor smelled the dank air
and other demons in a foreign place.

Interflora

When Ute went to England
on a darning course,
she met lots of sheep farmers
at village fairs. Her partner,
Werner, couldn't come
because of an important demo
and anyway, her child
– from her time with Lutz –
was at the Steiner Schule.
She knew rural English
wasn't Queen's, so
she talked a lot and didn't listen.

At all the fairs, there were
sewing, knitting and darning classes;
you only had to sign up. Ute
was in her element. Then
she met James – an Oxford man
who'd taken to the hills
in search of laylines and karma –
and he took her to his cottage.
He bore her o'er crystal waters
and stitched and sewed till
her tattered basket sang with pride.

He covered her fragile bones
with herbs of the mountain
and together they wove a new dress.

After a week's intensity, they concluded
love was not all; there was music and
there could be meditation and recurring light!
He dropped her
outside Interflora and she sent
a few guilty roses home
before returning to a deep sleep.

II.

At Home In My Shoes

Eimsbüttler Markt

From early on Saturdays, the market
in Eimsbüttel is restless. There are ugly
sisters roosting around candid civil servants;
some out-of-work seamen; an Arab on
a newspaper stand, and flowers and fruit
manicured in Holland, Cranz and Israel.
Hawkers and dealers trade quips and banter,
while people from other galaxies exchange
horoscopes, tchai-leaves and organic apples.

My old neighbour is shopping again:
Kinder aus dem Haus. All business,
with her old shopping bag and no faith in
visitors. She showed me poems she had
written when fruit was in her blood.
They were soft words. She said:
I must walk the streets again to strengthen
my voice:

To the market,
To the bus-stop,
In the rain,
In the haze,
In the sun,
In the fog,

To the dead
of night
by the great river
under the
stars.

I promised to tell her of my nomad friends.

One Saturday, I arrived early in an open carriage. I had planned to meet some nomads from up the Milky-Way.

They didn't show up, so I drifted over to a mirage and turned over a new leaf. Later that day, with sun out and about

and only a hint of a breeze, I whiled away an hour sifting therapists and others into bundles. I tried to interest

a woman in my ghosts. She said she'd stick to her own and she'd got a man from the East for fair weather.

Kiltimagh

Kiltimagh used to be ill-shapen.
It dressed up for processions
and the cups from the top shelf
came down for visitors. Rich men
arrived home to fresh flowers and
women, in pleats, read from the altar.
The streets were adorned with
stars and dead men and dead women;
with wet kisses and aunts who
had never kissed a local. Eros was
out there in the fields among
the cattle. To walk behind
a cherished woman was as sinful
as the chocolate skin of a belly-dancer.
Boys and girls knew each other;
the priest was the stranger.
Proud men left and proud women
stayed. They hung on to bits of
cloud and dreams that often left
them: till death do us part.
Some stood at the same corner
of the same bar for a hundred years,

longing for the day when the
town would float away to China or
Lisdoonvarna on the Nile. Others
painted their portraits on pub walls
and gave up talking. Teachers were
gilt-edged and there were tinkers that
never missed a horse fair in
Ballinasloe or a fight in Knock.

The English cheque is done for;
Laura Ashley has been sighted at
the church door;
traces of the ancient herring
have been dug up;
backbone is brought back
from Lourdes, and
girlfriends sleep soundly during
soccer matches.

Everywhere, there are children
of ghosts
right out to the suburbs
where
lovers step into the sun.

From The Munich Train

Around Würzburg, the wine rows
are so straight and clean,
their music must be dead.

I've just passed an ailing river,
a disinfected road and
a group of men in uniform.

It's October in lovely blue.
An old barge slaps away
at water; on the other side

a plough calms the valley;
the village clock works and
the black watch-tower is in place.

A few hang about, in chains,
whispering important things.
I wish those lines would go away.

Home Birds

For Rainer and Ruth on March 17,
1997

In sixteen years, this city
hasn't changed its underbelly.
There've been new things:
some lamps, muted gasps where
old brick gives off new light –
hardly ever miracles.

When seagulls glide up the river,
I drink with a man from
my country.
What are you up to these days?
he'll ask. I say
I am planting wing-seeds
in a dark room
and beat hard against the wall
during flying lessons.

A skinny woman gave such joy
that her man built a set of sails
for their new perambulator.
The framework's remained steadfast,
even though her man's hoisted
sail after sail. They have a big family
and enough sails for the open sea.

Then there are those winged sisters
who can be so unpredictable.
You stop them to ask the way

but they're among the clouds.
Come on down sisters! I chant.

You never did tell me what you work
at?

Planting wing-seeds is work:
seeds close to the bone
with all those flapping sisters
and tears on my wet face.

They'd had geese he said,
and a green patch and a dog
that made the geese flap.
He left after a Christmas dinner
to follow a girl on a gate –
a girl with soft thighs
who had filled far-away hills
with lyrical poems – with earth.
The geese returned each year
and her poems wore thin.
She took him through the streets
and was mistress of
the finer tones – clay tones.

We went to a match on Saturday.
The ball went wild
and all the players were mad
to get home before closing time.
We had a sausage on the way
to the pub; it was solid
and filled our heads
with the end of shapes to come.

One player fought for a goal
that never was, and
we both knew of a man
who had died
without a poem to his name.

A friend goes to Clifden
to sit among gravestones:
wings full of names,
people to fly to.
Play the joker!
the woman whispered
before he went
down to the seafront.
Tales came up off the waves
for a high-stool in Dublin.
He left, three sheets in the wind,
while travellers fought
over a horse.
The TV was showing pictures
of his fatherland – a penalty
that should never ever, ever!
and a sister in full flight.

A little bird
on the Liffey wall
held its ground.

A Hymn At Christmas

The man on TV is a politician.
He says so himself. Just in
from Europe and tail-wagging
sweet messages at Christmas.
He just loves to be home among
real people. A simple man,
he tells us; no passion, but
a wife is a wife for all that.

He's got golf down to a tee. She
holds a mirror to nature and
crucifies the turkey: it's juices run
riot, like unclean things. He's got
twenty-two or twenty-three grown
virgin daughters for Christmas
dinner. Their breeders share giggles
in the garden.

I like Father John better, now
that he's dropped touching
in church. Gaudeamus Igitur!

His permanent address is and
will be: where my wife is.
I focus my third eye on
poodle powder and frills in
Brussels, buy a gun, aim it
at his heart and pop!
It explodes like a ripe melon.
To my horror, all the bits increase,
multiply and fill the earth.

We've still got time to rescue our
threatened maidenheads. The virgins
gobble and he grins. His wife spreads
turkey legs. The breeders are called in,
and I turn both barrels on my third eye.

A Prodigal Mother

She tells her class: Ireland has got four
Nobel prize winners, no longer three
and Seamus is the latest. Every night
when the lights go down, she sits waiting
for something to begin – perhaps to end.

She took her mother role away with her
– she knows her daughter dreams of her
ghost mother; the role won't go away.
She uses it up on younger men and older men
and she'll squeeze in a story of O' Flaherty, or
Yeats for the brighter ones. She's a stranger
here. She sees her daughter for the last time
in every doorway – daily.

She went to Galway for the festival and
to Wexford with her family, but
she was a road-sailor with an empty
diary and a bag full of photos. It began
there. Life was lying dead in her gut.
She bought a song book and a book of poems.
She sang to her baby and read to her baby.
She was two people in one room. She left
to become one.

Abschied

She wrapped up her things, packed them into a silver locket and left before all the embers had died. The wild flowers on the flaking wall of the opposite platform had their own sense of place; this time she saw them. Out there in her twenties, there'd be vagrant smells and words dipped into wine. Yes! It was late spring. The flowers were shadow-wet. They kept their fragrance to themselves, but she could see their patterns shaping her juices in a frenzy of evergreen and chance. An old woman caught her eye – Abschied!

A few others gathered like ordinary bundles, speaking as urgently and softly as schoolboys passing Virgil round the classroom. One corpulent person was bursting at the seams, while a soldier and his girl were turning words into flesh – she could feel her fingers snuggle up to themselves.

Time Out

To the memory of my father

I've been dragging a leg
for a week and I think
more than I want to

think!

Thoughts seem to lie
there like little touches:
your new dress and the
stink of unwanted beer
behind closed curtains.

Cheers!

I smile at the Corkman
who had wanted
to throw me over the edge
of the city, before he slipped.

A Hamburg woman, on

a peace mission, died
among bullets last week;
the headline said
she had a lovely face.

And what of the old man
who used to scrub his scars
and talk faintly of his first wife?
My loved one, he'd say.

Now I'm just tired
and long to speak
as my father used to.

A New Language Later

For Patrick Duffy

I began a new language later and
still don't know a second word for
spate, spoke or the depth of a shadow.

I see people check ties and teeth in
a job agency window. They face
the same words at every
interview; never their own.

Moses heard voices out of
a burning bush. When my friend
heard them, he was committed.

I often talked to myself as a child,
found words in fields and furrows,
made sense of croaking ponds and
answered back. I never had to learn.

Words came, wild as weeds would
or little threatened trees do, all windy
and quaking. When I fell into water

screaming, I was understood; even
our old dog raised a dog eye at my cry.

I've also lain stranded between lips
with nothing to say. It's true!

The Best Wells Are Deep

For my brothers and sisters

The diviner cycled easily, mostly away from rivers
with rods lashed to his crossbar – a quiet man
who never asked, but did get paid in cash and kind
and by the sight of forty fresh pumps on the landscape.

Water was drawn to him and he to water.
His name hung on the flight of a rod: the diviner!
Resolute as a single note, he'd prowl and map
field after field, till he struck the hardest vein.

Water was drawn to him and he to water.

Deep springs, or springs from rock.
Cold, ice-cold water, water to be talked about.
Time goes slowly around a holy well.

Here in Paris, at the airport, three men – Asian looking men –
sit opposite. They drink.

They know everything about water, shots, shooting
and guns buried. I'm listening for the flow and balance;
for the deep slow breath of the man who didn't gather things
about water; for the water in rice. The best wells are deep.

There'll be no flood, he'd repeat. Water comes
shaped into pipe shapes, or tap shapes, or trough shapes.
What's left leaves traces in land-dips, or finds river currents
to ease out into with the grace of a beautiful woman.

The water diviner does small things. He leaves
a water song and there's no struggle. Water is
drawn to him and he to water.

A silent thought.

Kulturaustausch in Vogelsang

(Mecklenburg)

It was late evening when
I first drove in to Vogelsang.
From the easy swing of the road
the yellow windows chopped and changed
with every bend. I stopped
and stood by the house to
let the land smells into my blood.
The evening hung about
the stark and lone countryside:
a tom-cat crept round the doorpost.

I went in to Kulturaustausch.
There were epics in the air.
Some were tired, others
half in love with death, or
reviving God. When we sang
there was a grief in our songs
that made us *one*. Each of us
must have thought of home: of
a hamlet, in Ireland or Mecklenburg,
with only one phone; of old people;
of empty cottages or sounds
we feared. I speak another language.

The sun came up, groping and
ashen on the front wall. *Abschied!*
I drove through villages where
people were digging foundations
for new houses and new icons.
This Mecklenburg is solemn.

The Butcher Family

The man's club-foot had always kept him out of things, like a square peg, or a smell. While other children were sailing through sparkling childhood, he limped. There were no epics or heroes at home. A saint offered a life of halos and blood sacrifice; he saw a chance in a mirror. It prompted him to serve-his-time with a butcher and make a down payment on a church pew. He yearned to be a clean butcher; a butcher with a wife and a shop without miracles. He fevered through snow with a woman. She had a complex. It held them together till they married. They had no home, but all the trappings – dry weeping.

Over the years, the tears built up like brittle undergrowth and came to nothing. His wife sold what he slaughtered and their son, cold as wrapping paper, grew into a taste for blood. Sheep dozed and huddled as the days picked into their numbers.

The son was a humane killer; a tidy shot.
Their meat was clean; good meat, without
love or traces of the sun. The butcher's wife
exchanged a thousand thanks at the till, while
the boy warmed to voices in his head.

He was learning songs of praise for
the other side. His father sang from his pew.

The Blind Girl

The door opened
and the tip-tap
of the blind girl
worked its way
through an obstacle course
of bar stools
to sit beside me.
She exchanged words
with her stick,
mentioned work
in passing, but
her eyes lit up
when she talked
of the wonderful scenery
in parts of England.

A Sense Of Something Lost

For Joanna

The tongue was a late developer.
The question is:
what did people do before
the great muscle
was strong enough to wag?

Sign language! But surely
the dumb can't coax
prize blouse-buttons to swell
and burst down to the ankles?
Don't I know you from
somewhere,
or this fucking place is boiling?

Lucy must have fumed about
in her ancient settlement.
Even in a good light,
she couldn't have got past a grunt.
There'd 've been no couches,
clever people to chat it over with,
nor sweet talkers to take
virginity away:
swallow it all?

One man lived close to the bank
of a great river. He saw birds
that had seemed like prey
in his youth. In later years,
he knew their colours, felt when it
was going to rain and took his partner
to where their rainbow came
down to earth in a chorus.
He placed her many sweet names
on the air, and her feet were
strengthened by each name.

They lived gladly
through a time
when the skull was narrow;
when there was less room
for the tongue.

Philip

Philip, out of Sidney,
is sixty-two and sedentary.
He's had a family. Here,
in Broken Hill, he's
the wise Englishman
who knows everything, but
how to avoid beer-halls
and dice. He's got a pension,
out of narrowing arteries,
for church dinners and
a hostel bed. One morning
he took me for a walk,
showed me a little wound
and told me of his children.
Behind a church, he turned
his pockets out. They were full
of cuttings from the past.

Cill Aodain Graveyard On The Pollagh River

Cill Aodain graveyard's back on its feet –
headstones are standing better than ever,
bits of history are tacked onto walls; not enough
for a talkative village, but enough for now.
It's a clean monument. It pulls in the sun, but
it's lost its flair for weeds and our hunt for
relatives under growth – My great grandfather's
plain to be seen; his memory needs a touch up.

This used to be
an important place.

I had the monks from my father, fairy funerals
from a neighbour and jackdaws for fear.
I heard a fiddler from far away, and saw
ordinary young fishermen swop lean worms
on a Sunday. The pattern's darkening:
there's open-air mass once a year,
the eel and moor-hen lost out to a drainage scheme,
the hundred yards down to the meeting of the Pollagh
and the Glore, before they went on to India, used to be
forbidding and swampy – would you believe it!

From Cill Aodain To Killeenin

Mise Raifteiri an file / I am Raftery the poet.
No house. Nothing, but the hearthstone remains.
A whitethorn has become Raftery's bush. Child,
run and tell your teacher, before the flame dies!

Old and young on their knees – along lines of
rosary beads – would sing Cill Aodain between
decades to lessen the nausea of weak faith, or
the strut of a red-eyed schoolmaster.

His name is there: Anthony Raftery
in The Poet's Graveyard in County Galway.
Years ago, my father planted saplings from
Cill Aodain in Craughwell and a small group sang

to the vision of the blind bard. They were
respectful, as if waiting for tales
of his withered eyes, Taffe's horse, Mary Hynes,
or even a love song to fill in the long scar from

his hearthstone in Cill Aodain
to his gravestone in Killeenin.

Hands

Some grow before my eyes
and seem to creep like spider-plants
deep into memories.

Others, sculptured and filed,
lie flat like a heap of stones
talking to themselves.

This morning I watched
a pair of hands chattering
like busy beaks among berries.

Moon Phases

My son tells me stories
of men on the moon.

I remember the man
in the moon
lighting up playful fox-cubs
on a hill at harvest time.

A Blackthorn In Frost

A blackthorn in frost is sullen and black with
a few frosted sloes to add variety to its blackness.
On this night, the Pooka's left his Rath to
dance on eggs in hay, or to sour milk on
the farmer who, instead of whispering to
the fairy wind, looked to his wife in reproach.

Fairies will defend their trees and loosen their
winds in black dog shapes and wicked forms.
Oh yes, we do have fairies, a young woman
cried out playfully, then stepped into a
slipstream of darkness on the night before
her wedding. She would not want for sweet herbs,
lovely absurdities, or wisdom in old age.

They are the little people of Rathes and Lisses
who inhabit the fairy trilogy of oak, ash and thorn.
They slip into the human heart through gaps in
resolution and good deed, and kindle the countryside
with pranks, gusts of mischief, or hurtful spells.

Haunting In Mayo

For Ollie Burke

I'm a man about town with my window down
the length and breadth of the street.
Up down, hands around what's handy
and a full tank for the call when it comes.
At large, I supply virgins with experience,
never on the coast – the interior is deep
and slow and I've had my elbow out for
twenty years. I've got tall tales for the yank:
there are babies in the bog and mothers in
America. That's not tall. Father Mick's the man!
built a house for his mother, he did.

I'm a man about town,
I've got my window down.

I talked to a furze after closing-time when
urinating, and saw spirits spurting slurry
till the horizon blazed. I urinated more
and swore I'd drink in a stranger village
where dogs still chased cars and it's summer
for victims of house-high shadows: the long
and short of social welfare.

A bouncer'd think twice at home, or as far away
as Germany, or even America where they tear up
Route 66 with elbows all in place and a
deadly mission round the eyes. I'm small time,
the length and breadth of the street – from
village to village. Always alone. Girls scatter
in a blaze of feathers and when I swivel, they fall
one by one.

I stopped for a drink by a great river and
the panting fish were floating. They'd come up
for air. Big men, on the bank, sang
The Blue Danube. I put the boot down.

A holy man was standing on a hill spraying
all the colour away. Blessed are the meek,
for they shall possess the land. The auctioneer
was not sure, but the holy man continued
spraying.

I'm a man about town,
I've got my window down.

I've been working on my own grave for years –
digging.

Girls trip past and ask: What's your name handsome?

Paul, I say. Are you the saint? I dig on.

Better to marry than to burn. I dig deeper
with my elbow out.

The holy man is happy. He's sprayed most of the colour
off the hill. God created the world. All in a day's work.

He swears all the colour will be gone before Sunday.

Praise the Lord!

Lord, I am not worthy, said the poor woman with
endless kids the length and breadth of the street.

Raifteiri an file was blind, but he covered Cill Aodain
in red and black berries.

I hang about the post-box in search of news.

Nothing!

I turn the corner to where men abound
and my ears go haywire:

Haven't seen a pig for years,

Or a carrot on the loose,

Or a proud turnip out of plastic,

Or a house without a lawn,
Or a top shelf without weedkiller,
Or even a top dog.
When Mrs O'Brien's mule got stuck
in the bog, she left it there.

I've got my window down, my foot off the juice.
The neighbour, with the new bike, is talking again.
The bog road is coming back. A witch was sighted
on an outlying broom. What are you having
yourself?
That witch 'll do damage. Burn the bitch!

I'm still a man about town with my window down
the length and breadth of the street.

At Home In My Shoes

For Rike

Even without shoes, days on the school road
were not unkind to my feet, but I still stuck to
the margins. The master's car fighting the hill
told us the time and kept our tiny faces
taut. I renounce thee Satan! Pride
comes before the fall, said the priest in
black. Bless me father: Pure as driven snow:
Hail Mary full of grace till my feet began to
dance and itch for their fill of earth. Song
was easier than prayer. I could sing from
a hill-fort untouched by the love of God,
the drone of curates or a saving grace.

I met a witch with nothing to hide. She gave me
stones, rich curses and words to stay the wind.
I learned to see love-knots opening and closing
in season, heard the curlew and grew to love
the tatter of weeds. I was standing on firm ground.
The hill path was free of sceptre and blackthorn.
The woman anointed her feet and I followed suit.

III.
The Road Out

Fischmarkt

I.

Manfred grew up
on a farm
and he bore
all his freshness
to the city, married,
had children and sold
the juiciest fruit
on the market.

Early one Sunday
Manfred's voice faltered
and died and he went
back to the soil.

His son took over
but fruit rotted
at his touch.

II.

Once inside this window,
amid accordeon music,
I looked out
to the farthest seagull
and heard it call down
in my words and all the sky
became a white-grey flurry
and the blood inside my heart
swelled and I bit into it
before plunging deep
beyond the Fischmarkt.

I often take my pen here
to sketch seagulls.

III.

On this and every
Sunday morning
the beggar sat
with outstretched hand.

People filed past
but it was much later
that somebody noticed
his hand was stiff.

IV.

I'm a bundle of nerves.
I've seen into a poem
where my boat ran aground
on the street below.
I cry land ahoy
from my crow's-nest
on the fourth floor.
Passers-by shake their heads
when my fat neighbour
tells them the truth.
They tear up my boat
and leave me stranded.

I shall offer sacrifice
'til the boatman comes.

Zeitgeist

I sometimes need a place
where Zeitgeist
has another meaning:
a little place
where the skeleton
of a rusting car
lies easily among
charred whin-bushes,
and
I need a house
on shifting sands
with windows to the wind
and a pen
to suck in secrets
out of the black earth.

I could live there
with red and black berries,
with ghosts in naked bushes
after November, timeless
till spring. My Zeitgeist.

Door Through Time

This particular uncle was timid
with a slight limp that must have grown
out of sadness.

He was a teacher
but not in that way.
He used to climb down
into our stolen wilderness
and among centuries of involuntary tales
he'd stand on The Hill.

We'd listen to the victims of the Puca,
peer into the sealed cave under the High Fort
and on down to Thady's headstone
in Cill Aodain graveyard by the river.

In puddles among the rushes
under the Easter moon
I saw footprints of the Poet.

He'd often stand long,
as trapped in something
far away.
As he had come he went,
screaming; his voice
only half used.

Those hills and bushes
though smaller now,
still dance.

Fountains In Osterstraße

For Patrick Duffy

I sometimes wish
Osterstraße had fountains
like Aix-en-Provence.
Maybe then my vowels
would take on wings
and I could stand singing
down the language of
the man who agreed to love.
I could contemplate a mouth,
hold out my lips, or
listen to Pavarotti.
There would be water leaking
through rusting gutters
in the west of Ireland,
always something to drink
and a soft breeze
to carry dampness
even further.

Just over there, where
I'd like my fountain to be,
I saw a man dying for a drink
and I couldn't find my tongue.

Alsterschwimmhalle

Shortly after twelve
on a November Saturday
I am sitting sunken
and fully clothed
in a deck chair
by a swimming pool

The windows are fogged
and there are boards
from one to ten
to test the daredevil
and the diver.
A life-saver
sits perched like a priest,
in indifference.

Down at the other end,
there are whirlpools
for the lazy heart
and browning rooms
for moth-eaten skin.

The human is at its worst
around the water. Shoe-horned
into flimsy fashion, it flaunts
its forties fat fecklessly,
while children bob about
like corks.

One hour later,
forced to my feet by
circulation and pending lunch,
I take up position
by a pining plant, rooted
in a pot like a schoolchild
at its desk.

My son out there
is full of the joys
of nine years.

Dreamtime Dying... !

For Joachim Matschoss

When an Aborigine,
in hunger,
took a cow's life,
he was shot. The law
went free.
A shark was sentenced
to death
when a diver's leg
was lost.

And today
articles call for rights
for Aborigines.

There are no Songlines
in the city, but clusters
of silent people, bandaged
around bars, or standing
like stolen bundles,
waiting,
 waiting:
a mother stares
past the scream
in her child's eyes,
waiting,
 waiting.

On Sydney harbour
three men play didgeridoo
dreamless
and down to a dollar.

But let me repeat!
We did our best,
built a church
and gave them beads
to pray with,
waiting,
 waiting,
for social welfare
in a turning room
where a mother frowns
to recall the birth
of her child,
waiting,
 waiting,
while the judge upbraids:
concise,
... do you come from?
Home... address?

 There was silence.
The man saw sad sand
trickle through his fingers
and he heard the call
of his Songline.

Walls

I remember the old people
of Ireland say,
Those were the days
when caves were full
of fairies, and hills
leaked out stories.

I lay my head
against a wall
in Hamburg, listening
with outstretched hope
to mute concrete.

Those were the days
I attended your funeral.
Close to a weeping tree
your boy stared, aghast
at his birthmarks; your wonderful
eyes in his pocket.

I came home
in middle years
and scraped the hills
for word
of tales.

The Piper

The piper had no order
in his gait. He walked
into town and set down
on a waste patch.

Cut off, like a leper,
he sat dangerously free,
listening to star-coated notes
as if forever.

And when he played,
the children burst into blushes
and child-song.

Clusters of garbled voices
rumbled down sidestreets
and congealed under signs.
Curtains were drawn and replaced.

A kind of nervousness settled.
Dogs snarled face-to-face
below the square-pump.

It was late evening
as the piper blew shapes
into the air,
out of reach of the leaders.

The children played and danced,
reached up, plucked shapes
and built dreams into figures
and happy endings.

The leaders could smell
a fragrance and the stench
of their sacred books.

They twisted inspired notes
into drum-beat rhythms
and struck with garb and incense;
the town closed down.

When the church-bells rang,
a long No
from the children and very old
hung on the low air.

The leaders huddled in prayer,
to ghosts, and set forth
with blazing dogs
to track down their young.

A clear shot
rang out.

They embraced
their beaten children
and were proud.

The Widow

He died
and she said
his dying
had been like
the malignant emptying
of her cherished
room.

She is fiercely

alone.

The Road Out

I lay on the verge
tuned into Athlone, but heading
for London and beyond.
There was to be no return.
I held out my hand, until
a French palmist showed me
clear lines. We exchanged addresses
and I've never looked back.

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